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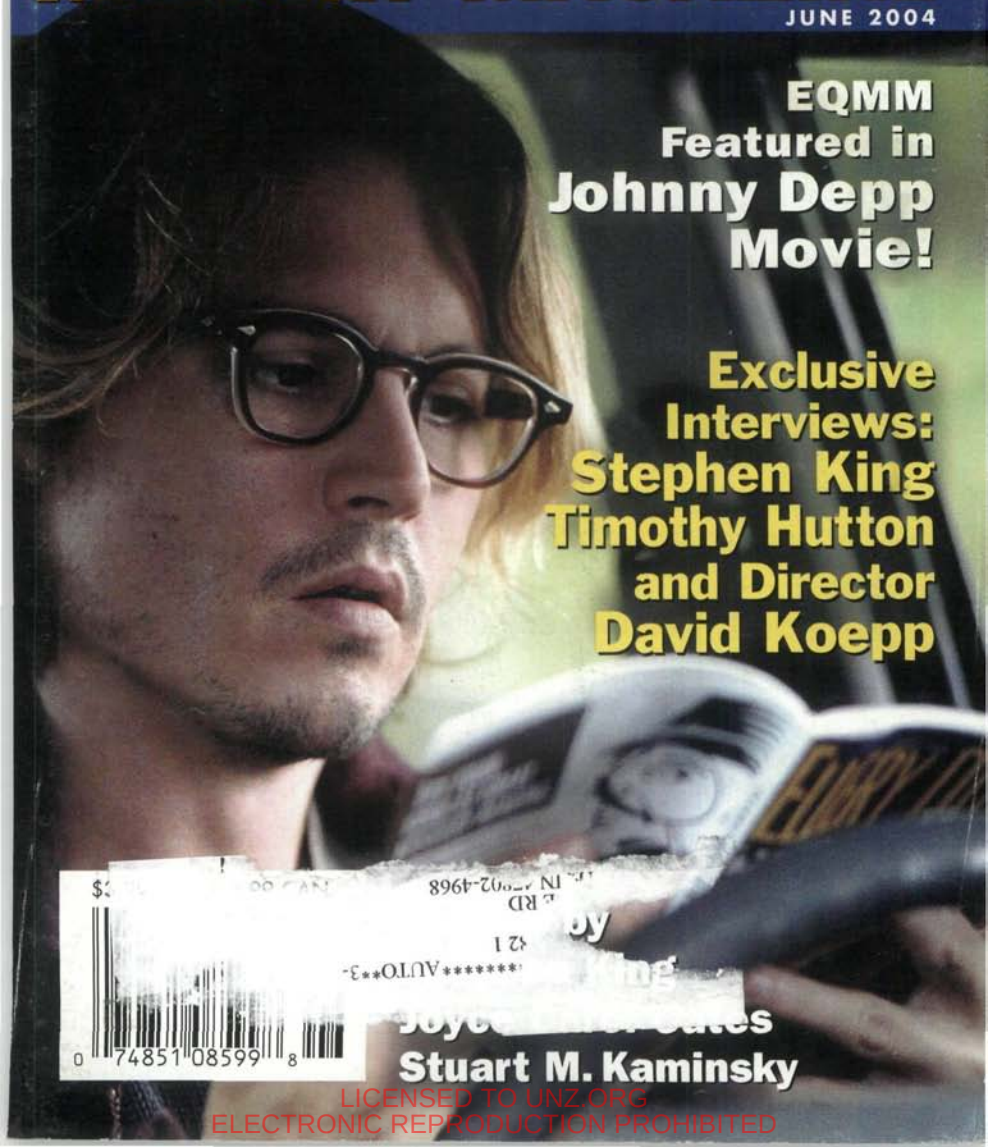

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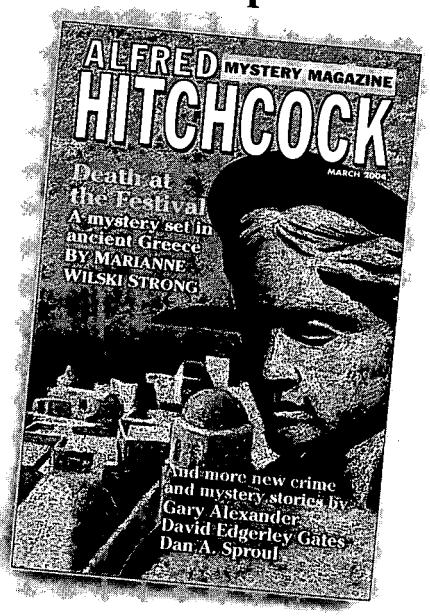
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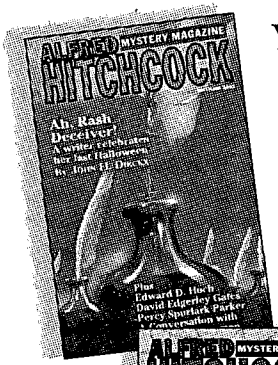

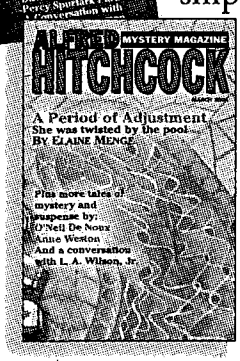
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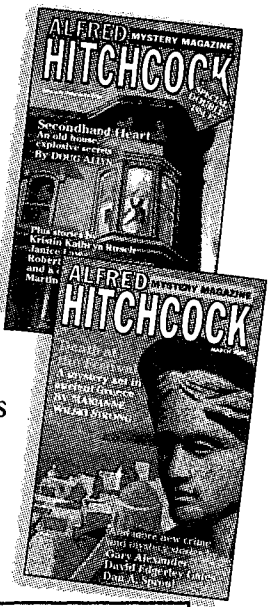

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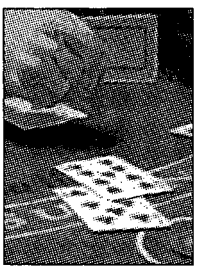

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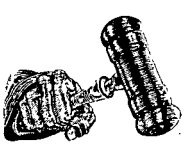

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Introduction and Dedication

The written word translated into the image on celluloid, the voice over the radio, the picture on TV, or, in our age, the digital likeness. How dynamic the interplay between the written and the projected is, especially in the realm of fiction, where word generates performance and performance—broadcast or exhibited—gives new, often transfigured life to what began on paper. This issue is about one such complex interaction of creative forces. It's about a writer called Queen whose work helped inspire a literary giant named King. And about how the writer King indirectly put the name Queen back on the screen this year, with one of the very same motion picture companies (Columbia) that 65 years ago gave it top billing in movies such as *Ellery Queen, Master Detective.*

This is not a straightforward tale of writer influencing writer, print to print, as it were. For Queen was as famous as a character in and writer for movies, and as a radio dramatist—one of radio's first—as he was as a novelist. And who can say whether the books of novelist Queen would ever have reached the reader King if "Queen" had not already become a household word through the ineluctable reach of film, radio, and later, TV. Besides, fame exerts its influence in many peripheral ways. Writer Queen gave his name—not to mention his editorial direction—to a magazine that early readers flocked to precisely because it bore the imprimatur of the renowned novelist, playwright, screenwriter, fictional character, and radio personality. By this same circuitous route reversed, writer Queen will likely travel back into the awareness of moviegoers this spring, as the magazine that bears his name takes something like center stage in Stephen King's new movie.

This issue revolves around that movie, *Secret Window,* as Stephen King, screenwriter and director David Koepp, and actor Timothy Hutton lend insights about its conception and production, star Johnny Depp graces the cover, and Charles Ardai reflects on the predicament of the movie's main character, Mort Rainey. In a medium in which the original storytellers' plots, settings, and even characters are often altered out of all recognition—think Whoopi Goldberg playing Lawrence Block's Bernie Rhodenbarr—the movie recreates the King story "Secret Window, Secret Garden" (from the book *Four Past Midnight*) with remarkable faithfulness. But perhaps that shouldn't be such a surprise, because Stephen King, like Ellery Queen before him, has had so intimate a connection with performance media throughout his career that it is bound to have shaped him just as he has shaped it. To a greater or lesser extent, that is true of virtually all the contributors to this issue: Either they've worked as screenwriters in the great dream factory, or their stories and books have been adapted for movies, TV, or radio. In that sense, this issue has a theme, something rare for *EQMM;* it even contains two stories that touch on the quest for, and the dangers of, Hollywood-style celebrity.

Writers often don't, but by all rights should, rank with Hollywood's most celebrated royalty. We close this issue with one who did—Ellery Queen. We begin it with one whose fame as a storyteller has reached legendary proportions; but someone, too, whose reputation for largeness of character—for generosity, gentlemanliness, and kindness—has also spread far and wide. Someone *EQMM* has found to be all of those things; who is—if we may be forgiven for overloading the metaphor—a king among writers and a prince among men. We dedicate this issue to him.

To Stephen King.

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A Shamus Award-nominated short-story writer whose tales have been appearing in *EQMM* since 1988 and who has most recently contributed to the anthology *Show Business Is Murder* (edited by Stuart M. Kaminsky), Charles Ardai made his debut as a novelist last month with *Little Girl Lost* (Five Star). He is also the editor of a forthcoming pulp-revival paperback series (Hard Case Crime) that will launch in September with books by Lawrence Block, Erle Stanley Gardner, and Max Allan Collins. In his other life, as a businessman, he founded the Internet company Juno, and is currently a managing director for The D. E. Shaw Group.

RAINEY DAYS

by Charles Ardai

Sometimes it isn't much fun to be a writer.

Case in point: the movie *Secret Window,* in which a writer named Mort Rainey is stalked by a mysterious and dangerous man, John Shooter, who accuses him of plagiarizing a short story Shooter wrote. To prove himself innocent, Rainey has to turn up a copy of the magazine in which the story was first published, since it came out before Shooter claims he wrote his version. Unfortunately, this being a film based on a Stephen King story, things don't exactly go smoothly.

Secret Window is a nerve-jangling thriller packed with more than the usual amount of star power, not even counting the pedigree of the original story. The screenplay is by David Koepp, author of numerous crowd pleasers including *Jurassic Park, Spider-Man,* and *Mission: Impossible*. The part of Mort Rainey is played by Johnny Depp, fresh from his celebrated turn as the eccentric pirate captain Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. John Shooter is John Turturro, the intense actor responsible for bringing on-the-edge characters to life for filmmakers ranging from the Coen Brothers and Spike Lee to Robert Redford and Adam Sandler. And in the starring role of the magazine on which the whole plot hinges, there's that dashing newcomer to the silver screen . . . *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.*

All right, "starring role" is a slight exaggeration. But it's much more than a cameo. And after sixty-three years and some 750 issues, *EQMM* can be forgiven a bit of excitement at its first turn in the spotlight. Any number of films and TV shows have been based on stories published in this magazine, but films and TV shows actually about the magazine? Where the hero, when he finds himself in a tight spot, turns to the magazine's editors for help? Not so many.

That *EQMM* has this chance to shine is wholly attributable to one man: Stephen King. By picking an issue of *EQMM* to be the MacGuffin in his story, he probably did more than anyone since Ellery Queen to bring the magazine to the attention of new readers. Why did he do it? Only he can say, obviously—but it's worth noting that, like Mort Rainey, King is a one-time *EQMM* author himself. And this isn't the first time he's drawn on his own life as the basis for one of his excursions into terror.

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The Wedding Gig

by Stephen King

In the year 1927 we were playing jazz in a speakeasy just south of Morgan, Illinois, which is seventy miles from Chicago. It was real hick country, not another big town for twenty miles in any direction. But there were a lot of plowboys with a hankering for something stronger than Moxie after a hot day in the field, and a lot of young bucks out duding it up with their drugstore buddies. There were also some married men (you know them, friend, they might as well be wearing signs) coming far out of their way to be where no one would recognize them while they cut a rug with their not-quite-legit lassies.

That was when jazz was jazz, not noise. We had a five-man combination—drums, clarinet, trombone, piano, and trumpet—and we were pretty good. That was still three years before we made our first records and four years before talkies.

We were playing "Bamboo Bay" when this big fellow walked in, wearing a white suit and smoking a pipe with more squiggles in it than a French horn. The whole band was a little drunk but the crowd was positively blind and everyone was having a high old time. There hadn't been a single fight all night. All of us were sweating rivers and Tommy Englander, the guy who ran the place, kept sending up rye. Englander was a good fellow to work for, and he liked our sound.

The guy in the white suit sat down at the bar and I forgot him. We finished up the set with "Aunt Hagar's Blues," which was what passed for racy out in the boondocks back then, and got a good round of applause. Manny had a big grin on his face as he put his horn down, and I clapped him on the back as we left the bandstand. There was a lonely-looking girl in a green evening dress who had been giving me the eye all night. She was a redhead, and

Days after this issue comes off the press, a new 15-hour drama series created by Stephen King directly for TV will premiere on ABC. The first episode of *Kingdom Hospital* will occupy two hours of prime time on March 3rd, from 9 to 11 ET, and will air thereafter on Wednesdays from 10 till 11. Described by the author as a cross between *ER* and *The Shining*, the series is said to have a quirky cast of characters, and both darkly comedic and supernatural elements. ¶

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I've always been partial to those. I got a signal from her eyes and the tilt of her head, so I started threading my way through the crowd to get to her. Halfway there, the man in the white suit stepped in front of me. Up close he looked tough, with bristly back hair and the flat, oddly shiny eyes that some deep-sea fish have. There was something familiar about him.

"Want to talk to you outside," he said.

The redhead was looking away. She seemed disappointed.

"It can wait," I said. "Let me by."

"My name is Scollay. Mike Scollay."

I knew the name. Mike Scollay was a small-time racketeer from Chicago who made his money running booze in from Canada. His picture had been in the paper a few times. The last time had been when another little Caesar tried to gun him down.

"You're pretty far from Chicago," I said.

"I brought some friends. Let's go outside."

The redhead looked over and I pointed to Scollay and shrugged. She sniffed and turned her back.

"You queered that," I said.

"Bimbos like that are a penny the bushel in Chi," he said. "Outside."

We went out. The air was cool on my skin after the smoky close atmosphere of the club, sweet with fresh-cut alfalfa grass. The stars were out, soft and flickering. The hoods were out, too, but they didn't look a bit soft, and the only things flickering on them were their cigarettes.

"I've got some money for you," Scollay said.

"I haven't done anything for you."

"You're going to. It's two C's. Split it up with the band or hold back a hundred for yourself."

"What is it?"

"A gig," he said. "My sis is getting married. I want you to play for the reception. She likes Dixieland. Two of my boys say you play good Dixieland."

I told you Englander was good to work for. He was paying eighty a week split five ways, four hours a night. This guy was offering well over twice that for one gig.

"It's from five to eight, next Friday," Scollay said. "At the Grover Street Hall in Chi."

"It's too much," I said. "How come?"

"There's two reasons," Scollay said. He puffed on his pipe. It looked out of place in that yegg's face. He should have had a Lucky dangling from his mouth, or a Sweet Caporal. The pipe made him look sad and funny.

"First," he said, "maybe you heard the Greek tried to rub me out."

"I saw your picture in the paper," I said. "You were the guy try-

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ing to crawl into the sidewalk."

"Smart guy," he growled, but with no real force. "I'm getting too big for him. The Greek is getting old and he still thinks small. He ought to be back in the old country, drinking olive oil and looking at the Pacific."

"It's the Aegean," I said.

"An ocean's an ocean," he said. "Anyway, the Greek is still out to get me."

"In other words, you're paying two hundred because our last number might be arranged for Enfield rifle accompaniment."

Anger flashed on his face, and something else—sorrow? "I got the best protection money can buy. If anyone funny sticks his nose in, he won't get a chance to sniff twice."

"What's the other thing?"

Softly he said, "My sister's marrying an Italian."

"A good Catholic like you," I sneered softly.

The anger flashed again, white-hot, and I thought I'd pushed it too far. "A good *mick!* I'm a good mick, sonny, and you better not forget it!" To that he added, almost too low to be heard, "Even if I did lose most of my hair, it was red."

I started to say something, but he didn't give me the chance. He swung me around and pressed his face down until our noses almost touched. I never saw such anger and humiliation and rage and determination in a man's face. You never see that on a white face these days, the love-hate pressure of a man's race. But it was there then, and I saw it that night.

"She's fat," he breathed. "A lot of people have been laughing at me when my back is turned. They don't do it when I can see them, though. I'll tell you that, Mr. Cornet Player. Because maybe this little twerp was all she could get. But you're not gonna laugh at her and nobody else is, either, because you're gonna play too loud. No one is going to laugh at my sis."

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know why he told me or even why he thought a Dixieland band was his answer, but I didn't want to argue with him. You wouldn't have wanted to, either, funny clothes and pipe or not.

"We don't laugh at people when we play our gigs," I said. "Makes it too hard to pucker."

That relieved the tension. He laughed a short barking laugh. "You be there at five, ready to play. Grover Street Hall. I'll pay your expenses both ways."

I felt railroaded into the decision, but it was too late now. Scollay was already striding away, and one of his paid companions was holding open the back door of a Packard coupe.

They drove away. I stayed out awhile longer and had a smoke. The evening was soft and fine and Scollay seemed more and more

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like something I might have dreamed. I was just wishing we could bring the bandstand out to the parking lot and play when Biff tapped me on the shoulder.

"Time," he said.

"Okay."

We went back in. The redhead had picked up some salt-and-pepper sailor who looked twice her age. I don't know what a member of the U.S. Navy was doing in central Illinois, but as far as I was concerned, he could have her if her taste was that bad.

I didn't feel so hot. The rye had gone to my head, and Scollay seemed a lot more real in here, where the fumes of what his kind sold were strong enough to float on.

"We had a request for 'Camptown Races' " Charlie said.

"Forget it," I said curtly. "None of that now."

I could see Billy-Boy stiffen just as he was sitting down to the piano, and then his face was smooth again. I could have kicked myself around the block.

"I'm sorry, Billy," I told him. "I haven't been myself tonight."

"Sure," he said, but there was no big smile and I knew he felt bad. He knew what I had started to say.

I told them about the gig during our next break, being square with them about the money and how Scollay was a hood (although I didn't tell them there was another hood out to get him). I also told them that Scollay's sister was fat but nobody was to even crack a smile about it. I told them Scollay was sensitive.

It seemed to me that Billy-Boy Williams flinched again at that, but you couldn't tell it from his face. It would be easier to tell what a walnut was thinking by reading the wrinkles on the shell. Billy-Boy was the best ragtime piano player we ever had and we were all sorry about the little ways it got taken out on him as we traveled from one place to another—the Jim Crow car south of the Mason-Dixon line, the balcony at the movies, the different hotel room in some towns—but what could I do? In those days you lived with those differences.

We turned up at Grover Street on Friday at four o'clock just to make sure we'd have plenty of time to set up. We drove up from Morgan in a special Ford truck that Biff and Manny and I had put together. The back end was all enclosed, and there were two cots bolted to the floor. We even had an electric hotplate that ran off the battery, and the band's name was painted on the outside.

The day was just right—a ham-and-egg summer day if you ever saw one, with little white angel clouds floating over the fields. But it was hot and gritty in Chicago, full of the hustle and bustle you could get out of touch with in a place like Morgan. When we got there my clothes were sticking to my body and I needed to visit the comfort

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station. I could have used a shot of Tommy Englander's rye, too.

The hall was a big wooden building, sort of affiliated with the church where Scollay's sis was getting married, I guess. You know the kind of joint I mean—Ladies' Robert Browning Society on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Bingo on Wednesdays, and a sociable for the kids on Friday or Saturday night.

We trooped up the walk, each of us carrying his instrument in one hand and some part of Biff's drum-kit in the other. A thin lady with no breastworks to speak of was directing traffic inside. Two sweating men were hanging crepe paper. There was a bandstand at the front of the hall, and over it was a pair of pink-paper wedding bells and some tinsel lettering which said *BEST ALWAYS MAUREEN AND RICO.*

Maureen and Rico. Damned if I couldn't see why Scollay was so upset. Maureen and Rico. Now wasn't that a combination!

The thin lady saw us and swooped down to our end of the hall. She looked like she had a lot to say, so I beat her to the punch. "We're the band," I said.

"The band?" She blinked at our instruments distrustfully. "Oh. I was hoping you were the caterers."

I smiled as if caterers always carried snare drums and trombone cases.

"You can—" she began, but just then a tough-looking boy of about nineteen strolled over. A cigarette was dangling from the left corner of his mouth, but so far as I could see, it wasn't doing a thing for his image except making his left eye water.

"Open that stuff up," he said.

Charlie and Biff looked at me and I just shrugged. We opened our cases and he looked at the horns. Seeing nothing that looked lethal, he wandered back to his corner and sat down on a folding chair.

"You can set your things up right away," she went on, as if there had been no interruption. "There's a piano in the other room. I'll have my men wheel it in when we're done putting up our decorations."

Biff was already lugging his drum-kit up onto the little stage.

"I thought you were the caterers," she said to me in a distraught way. "Mr. Scollay ordered a wedding cake and there are hors d'oeuvres and roasts of beef and—"

"They'll be here, ma'am," I said. "They get payment on delivery."

"—capons and roasts of pork and Mr. Scollay will be furious if—" She saw one of her men pausing to light a cigarette just below a dangling streamer and screamed, *"HENRY!"* The man jumped as if he had been shot, and I escaped to the bandstand.

We were all set up by a quarter to five. Charlie, the trombone player, was wah-wahing away into a mute and Biff was loosening

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up his wrists. The caterers had arrived at four-twenty and Miss Gibson (that was her name; she made a business out of such affairs) almost threw herself on them.

Four long tables had been set up and covered with white linen, and four black women in caps and aprons were setting places. The cake had been wheeled into the middle of the room for everyone to gasp over. It was six layers high, with a little bride and groom on top.

I walked outside to have a smoke and just about halfway through it I heard them coming, tooting away and making a general racket. When I saw the lead vehicle coming around the corner of the block below the church, I snubbed my smoke and went back inside.

"They're coming," I told Miss Gibson.

She went white as a sheet. That lady should have picked a different profession. "The tomato juice!" she screamed. "Bring in the tomato juice!"

I went back up to the bandstand and we got ready. We had played quite a few gigs like this before—what band hasn't?—and when the doors opened, we swung into a ragtime version of "The Wedding March" that I had arranged myself. Most receptions we played for loved it.

Everybody clapped and yelled and then started gassing among themselves, but I could tell by the way some of them were tapping their feet that we were getting through. We were on—it was going to be a good gig.

But I have to admit that I almost blew the whole number when the groom and the blushing bride walked in. Scollay, dressed in a morning-coat and a ruffled shirt and striped trousers, shot me a hard look, and don't think I didn't see it. The rest of the band kept a poker face, too, and we didn't miss a note. Lucky for us. The wedding party, which looked as if it were made up almost entirely of Scollay's goons and their molls, were wise already. They had to be, if they'd been at the church. But I'd only heard faint rumblings, you might say.

You've heard about Jack Sprat and his wife. Well, this was a hundred times worse. Scollay's sister had the red hair he was losing, and it was long and curly. But not that pretty auburn shade you may be imagining. It was as bright as a carrot and as kinky as a bedspring. She looked just awful. And had Scollay said she was fat? Brother, that was like saying you can buy a few things in Macy's. The woman was a dinosaur—350 if she was a pound. It had all gone to her bosom and hips and thighs like it does on fat girls, making her flesh grotesque and frightening. Some fat girls have pathetically pretty faces, but Scollay's sis didn't even have that. Her eyes were too close together, her mouth was too big, and her ears stuck out. Even thin, she'd have been as ugly as the serpent in the garden.

That alone wouldn't have made anybody laugh, unless they were

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stupid or just poison-mean. It was when you added the groom, Rico, to the combination that you wanted to laugh until you cried.

He could have put on a top hat and stood in the top half of her shadow. He was about five three and must have weighed all of ninety pounds soaking wet. He was skinny as a rail, and his complexion was darkly olive. When he grinned around nervously, his teeth looked like a picket fence in a slum neighborhood.

We just kept right on playing.

Scollay roared, "The bride and the groom! May they always be happy!"

Everyone shouted their approval and applauded. We finished our number with a flourish, and that brought another round. Scollay's sister Maureen smiled nervously. Rico simpered.

For a while everyone just walked around, eating cheese and cold cuts on crackers and drinking Scollay's best bootleg scotch. I had three shots myself between numbers, and it was pretty smooth.

Scollay began to look a little happier, too—I imagine he was sampling his own wares pretty freely.

He dropped by the bandstand once and said, "You guys play pretty good." Coming from a music lover like him, I reckoned that was a real compliment.

Just before everyone sat down to the meal, Maureen came up herself. She was even uglier up close, and her white gown (there must have been enough white satin to cover three beds) didn't help her at all. She asked us if we could play "Roses of Picardy" like Red Nichols and His Five Pennies, because it was her very favorite song. Fat and ugly or not, she was very sweet about it, not a bit hoity-toity like some of the two-bitters that had been dropping by. We played it, but not very well. Still, she gave us a sweet smile that was almost enough to make her pretty, and she applauded when it was done.

They sat down to the meal around six-fifteen, and Miss Gibson's hired help rolled in the chow: They fell to it like a bunch of animals, which was not entirely surprising, and kept drinking it up all the time. I couldn't help noticing the way Maureen was eating, though. She made the rest of them look like old ladies in a roadside tearoom. She had no more time for sweet smiles or listening to "Roses of Picardy." That lady didn't need a knife and a fork. She needed a steam shovel. It was sad to watch her. And Rico (you could just see his chin over the edge of the table where the bride's party was sitting) just kept handing her things, never changing that nervous simper.

We took a twenty-minute break while the cake-cutting ceremony was going on and Miss Gibson herself fed us out in the back part of the hall. It was hot as blazes with the cook stove on, and none of us was too hungry. Manny and Biff had brought some pastry boxes, though, and were stuffing in slabs of roast beef and

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roast pork every time Miss Gibson turned her back.

By the time we returned to the bandstand, the drinking had begun in earnest. Tough-looking guys staggered around with silly grins on their mugs or stood in corners haggling over racing forms. Some couples wanted to Charleston, so we played "Aunt Hagar's Blues" (those goons ate it up) and "I'm Gonna Charleston Back to Charleston" and some other jazzy numbers like that. The molls rocked around the floor, flashing their rolled hose and sounding as shrill as macaws. It was almost completely dark outside, and millers and moths had come in through the open windows and were flitting around the light fixtures. And as the song says, the band played on. The bride and groom stood on the sidelines—neither of them seemed interested in slipping away early—almost completely neglected. Even Scollay seemed to have forgotten them. He was pretty drunk.

It was almost eight o'clock when the little fellow crept in. I spotted him immediately because he was sober and dressed better than the rest of them. And he looked scared. He looked like a near-sighted cat in a dog pound. He walked up to Scollay, who was talking with some floozie right by the bandstand, and tapped him on the shoulder. Scollay wheeled around, and I heard every word they said.

"Who the hell are you?" Scollay asked rudely.

"My name is Katzenos," the fellow said, and his eyes rolled whitely. "I come from the Greek."

Motion on the floor came to a dead stop. We kept on playing, though, you bet. Jacket buttons were freed, and hands stole out of sight. I saw Manny looking nervous. Hell, I wasn't so calm myself.

"Is that right?" Scollay said ominously.

The guy burst out, "I din't want to come, Mr. Scollay—the Greek, he has my wife. He say he kill her if I doan' give you his message!"

"What message?" Scollay asked. His face was like a thundercloud.

"He say—" The guy paused with an agonized expression. His throat worked like the words were physical, and caught in there. "He say to tell you your sister is one fat pig. He say . . . he say . . ." His eyes rolled wildly at Scollay's expression. I shot a look at Maureen. She looked as if she had been slapped. "He say she's tired of going to bed alone. He say—you bought her a husband."

Maureen gave a great strangled cry and ran out, weeping. The floor shook. Rico pattered after her, his face bewildered and unhappy.

But Scollay was the frightening one. His face had grown so red it was purple and I half expected his brains to just blow out his ears. I saw that same look of mad agony. Maybe he was just a cheap hood, but I felt sorry for him. You would have, too.

When he spoke, his voice was very quiet.

"Is there more?"

The little Greek wrung his hands with anguish. "Please doan' kill me, Mr. Scollay. My wife—the Greek, he got my wife! I doan'

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want to say these thing. He got my wife, my woman! He—"

"I won't hurt you," Scollay said, quieter still. "Tell me the rest."

"He say the whole town is laughing at you."

There was dead silence for a second. We had stopped playing. Then Scollay turned his eyes to the ceiling. Both his hands were shaking and held out clenched in front of him. He was holding them in fists so tight that it seemed his hamstrings ran all the way up his arms.

"All right!" He screamed. *"ALL RIGHT!"*

And he ran for the door. Two of his men tried to stop him, to tell him it was suicide, just what the Greek wanted, but Scollay was like a crazy man. He knocked them down and rushed out into the black summer night.

In the dead quiet that followed, all I could hear was the little man's tortured breathing and somewhere out back, the soft sobbing of the fat bride.

Just about then the young kid who had braced us when we came in uttered a curse and made for the door.

Before he could get there, automobile tires screeched on the pavement down the block and a car engine roared.

"It's him!" The kid screamed from the doorway. "Get down, boss! Get down!"

The next second we heard gunshots—maybe as many as ten, mixed calibers, close together. The car howled away. I could see all I wanted to reflected in that kid's horrified face.

Now that the danger was over, all the goons rushed out. The door to the back of the hall banged open and Maureen ran through again, everything jiggling. Her face was even more puffy, now with tears as well as weight. Rico came in her wake like a bewildered valet. They went out the door.

Miss Gibson appeared in the empty hall, her eyes wide. The man who had brought the message to Scollay had powdered.

"What happened?" Miss Gibson asked.

"I think Mr. Scollay just got rubbed out," Biff said. He looked green.

Miss Gibson stared at him for a moment and then just fainted dead away. I felt a little like fainting myself.

Just then, from outside, came the most anguished scream I have ever heard, then or since. You didn't have to go and peek to know who was tearing her heart out in that street, keening over her dead brother even while the cops and news photographers were on their way.

"Let's get out of here," I muttered. "Quick."

We had it packed in before five minutes had passed. Some of the goons came back, but they were too drunk and too scared to notice the likes of us.

We went out the back, each of us carrying part of Biff's drum-kit.

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Quite a parade we must have made, walking up the street, for anyone who saw us. I led the way, with my horn case tucked under my arm and a cymbal in each hand. When we got to the truck we threw everything in, willy-nilly, and hauled our butts out of there. We averaged forty-five miles an hour going back to Morgan, back roads or not, and Scollay's goons must not have bothered to tip the cops to us, because we never heard from them.

We never got the two hundred bucks, either.

She came into Tommy Englander's speak about ten days later, a fat girl in a black mourning dress. It didn't look any better than the white satin.

Englander must have known who she was (her picture had been in the Chicago papers, next to Scollay's) because he showed her to a table himself and shushed a couple of drunks at the bar who were sniggering.

I felt really bad for her, like I feel for Billy-Boy sometimes. It's tough to be on the outside. And she had been very sweet, the little I had talked to her.

When the break came, I went over.

"I'm sorry about your brother," I said, feeling awkward and hot in the face. "I know he really cared for you—"

"I might as well have fired those guns myself," she said. She was looking at her hands, which were really her best feature, small and well formed. She had a musician's fingers. "Everything that little man said was true."

"That's not so," I said uncomfortably, not knowing if it was so or not. I was sorry I'd come over, she talked so strangely. As if she were all alone, and crazy.

"I'm not going to divorce him, though," she went on. "I'd kill myself first."

"Don't talk that way," I said.

"Haven't you ever wanted to kill yourself?" she asked, looking up at me passionately. "Doesn't it make you feel like that when people use you and then laugh about it? Do you know what it feels like to eat and eat and hate yourself and then eat more? Do you know what it feels like to kill your own brother because you're *fat?*"

People were turning to look, and the drunks were sniggering again.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

I wanted to talk to her, to tell her I was sorry, too. I wanted to tell her something that would make her feel better, but I couldn't think of a single thing.

So I just said, "I have to go. The next set—"

"Of course," she said softly. "Of course you do. Or they'll start to laugh at *you*. But why I came was—will you play 'Roses of Picardy'? I

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thought you played it very nicely at the reception. Will you?"

"Sure," I said. "Glad to."

And we did. But she left halfway through the number. And since it was sort of schmaltzy for a place like Englander's, we swung into a ragtime version of "The Varsity Drag," which always tore them up. I drank too much the rest of the evening and by closing time I had forgotten all about it, almost.

Leaving for the night, it came to me that I should have told her that life goes on. That's what you say when someone's loved one dies. But, thinking about it, I was glad I hadn't. Maybe that's what she was afraid of.

Of course now everyone knows about Maureen Romano and her husband Rico, who survives her as the taxpayers' guest in the Illinois State Penitentiary. How she took over Scollay's two-bit organization and worked it into a Prohibition empire that rivaled Capone's. How she wiped out the Greek and two other North Side gang leaders, swallowing their operations. Rico, the bewildered valet, became her first lieutenant and was supposedly responsible for a dozen gangland hits himself.

I followed her exploits from the West Coast, where we were making some pretty successful records. Without Billy-Boy, though. He formed a band of his own after we left Englander's, an all-black Dixieland band, and they did real well down South. It was just as well. Lots of places wouldn't even audition us with a Negro in the group.

But I was telling you about Maureen. She made great news copy, not just because she was shrewd, but because she was a big operator in more ways than one. When she died of a heart attack in 1933, the papers said she weighed 500 pounds, but I doubt that. No one gets that big, do they?

Anyway, her funeral made the front page—more than anyone could say for Scollay, who never got anyplace past page four in his whole miserable career. It took ten pallbearers to carry her coffin. There was a picture of that coffin in one of the tabloids. It was a horrible thing.

Rico wasn't bright enough to hold things together by himself, and he fell for assault with intent to kill the very next year.

I've never been able to get her out of my mind, or the agonized, hangdog way Scollay had looked that first night when he talked about her.

It's all very strange. I can't feel too sorry for her, looking back. Fat people can always stop eating. Poor guys like Billy-Boy Williams can only stop breathing. I still don't see any way I could have helped either of them, but I do feel sort of bad every now and then. Probably because I'm not so young as I once was. That's all it is, isn't it? Isn't it? ●

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Art by June Levine

TEQUILA MEMORIES

by Clark Howard

Lee Walsh got off the Trailways bus in Brownsville, Texas, feeling after an all-night ride like he had been doubled over twice and kept in a midget coffin for twelve hours. The only thing that kept him from being totally crippled, he thought, was that between Sweetwater and McAllen, he'd had to change buses three times—in San Angelo, Del Rio, and Laredo—which forced him to get up and walk around for a few minutes.

Lee was carrying twenty pounds too much weight and he knew it; five years of starchy prison food had put it on his shoulders, his thighs, and around his middle. But he knew he'd have it off in two or three weeks; the broncs and bulls would shake it off him—that is, if he could convince a traveling rodeo to take him on. In the meantime, he moved a little slower, breathed a little heavier.

With his canvas bag under one arm, a day-old folded-up *Rodeo News* under the other, he used both hands to sprinkle coarse tobacco from a pouch onto a thin sheet of paper, rolled it expertly into a cigarette, licked one edge to seal it, and twisted the other end to put between his lips. He lit it with a stick match dug to

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flame by a bone-hard thumbnail. Standing outside the bus depot, he looked around at what he could see of Brownsville. It was, he decided, just like any other Tex-Mex border town: buildings and stores painted in colors you'd never see in Kansas or Michigan, colors that were hot and Mexican, that came from Matamoros just across the line in Old Mexico. People down here, Lee knew, never called it simply "Mexico." It was "Old Mexico."

Behind the colors were American businesses that cultivated trade with the *fronterizos*—the Mexican people who lived on the other side of the line and were allowed to come over for six hours during daylight to spend their money on what they couldn't get in Matamoros. In exchange, leather-skinned cowboys and beer-drinking truck drivers, and occasional suntanned adolescent high-school football players and pale bank clerks, crossed over to Matamoros at night to get things they couldn't get in Brownsville. Life on the border was loose. Give and take.

Works of both fiction and nonfiction by Clark Howard have made their way to TV. A book by the award-winning true-crime writer formed the basis of *Six Against the Rock*, a three-hour miniseries; two of his stories were adapted for *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*; he cowrote the CBS TV movie *The Last of the Good Guys*; and his first novel became a theatrical movie starring Matt Dillon and Tommy Lee Jones. The number of his stories under continuous option (one for 15 years) is astounding.

Walking down to the International Boundary, which was a short toll bridge over the Rio Grande, Lee sauntered out of the United States and into Old Mexico. The black-uniformed Mex border guards barely glanced at him as he passed their checkpoint. He was just another *gringo* out to buy a switchblade, some duty-free liquor, a little dope, a snuff film, or maybe twenty minutes of a wet dream come true with somebody he hoped would look like Salma Hayek. Whatever, it didn't matter to the unsmiling men in the black uniforms and even blacker sunglasses; nothing anyone could bring *into* Matamoros could make it any worse.

On the Mex side, Lee paid no attention to a crush of peddlers of all ages offering to sell him cigarettes, gum, pastry, fruits, trinkets, information about women. He walked into the first bar he came to, a place called *Los Amores*—The Lovers—and from the bar ignored three young street girls in a booth, and a *coyote*—a people-smuggler—talking in low tones to two soon-to-be *mojados*—wetbacks—that he would lead across the border that night.

When the bartender came over, Lee ordered a shot of Cuervo Gold and a bottle of Corona. He downed the tequila straight,

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chased it with the cold yellow beer, and momentarily felt himself begin to relax for the first time since twenty-eight hours earlier when he'd left Sweetwater Penitentiary with full release papers and fourteen hundred and twenty dollars in cash. The money had been saved at the rate of sixteen cents an hour, half of what he earned working in the stinking, steaming prison laundry.

Leaning forward on the bar, he ordered another shot. A few minutes later, he looked around at the three young street girls to decide which one he wanted.

It was late in the afternoon when Lee walked out to the Matamoros fiesta grounds where he'd learned from *Rodeo News* that a Mexican rodeo was set to put on its first three shows the following day, then begin a northern tour all the way up to Piedras Negras before ending up in Monterrey. When he arrived, rider chutes were being set up alongside the permanent bleachers. A big banner had been strung out across the top of the bleachers announcing: RODEO EL GRANDE. Beyond where the chutes were being erected, a long line of stock trucks and house trailers were parked, and Mex cowboys were herding broncs into one corral, bulls into another. On the side of one large trailer, newer than most, was lettered VALDO RODEO ENTR. PTY. LTD. Lee grinned. Pretty fancy name, he thought, for a gypsy Mex rodeo that traveled from border town to border town.

Inside, he found a snake-thin Mexican about his own age, thirty-eight, with gelled hair combed straight back and three gold chains visible under a shirt unbuttoned halfway down to his belt. He was sitting behind a cluttered metal desk littered with papers, several empty coffee containers, and two full ashtrays.

"You the boss here?" Lee asked.

"What do you want?" the Mex asked with a cursory glance.

"I want to know if you're the boss," Lee repeated evenly.

"I'm Valdo. What do you want?"

Lee pulled out his roll of money. "I want to sign up for a couple of events. Bronc riding and bull riding. What's your entry fee?"

Valdo's eyes flicked up and down Lee's pale, overweight body. "You looking to commit suicide, *gringo?* You can't rodeo."

"Yeah, I can," Lee said flatly. "I'm a little out of shape, a little out of practice, but I can rodeo with any man. Couple of weeks and I'll be doubling and tripling my entry fees in prize money. How much?"

Valdo shrugged. "It's your body and your money, *hombre.* Thirty-five in U. S. dollars per event." As Lee was counting out the money, Valdo asked, "How long since you rodeoed?"

"Five years."

Valdo whistled. "Long time." After he had pocketed the entry

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fees, he said, "I gotta have a medical slip on you. Just a formality required by my insurance company. Go over to the first-aid trailer and see my sister, Lupe. She's a registered nurse. I got to make sure you don't got no heart murmur or nothing like that. I can't have no cowboys dying on me; too much paperwork."

Lee signed his entry forms and left.

Lupe Valdo was a few years younger than her brother, without the greasy hair and not so skinny. She had a few acne scars on her right cheek, and eyes that looked like they were as deep as forever.

"Aren't you a little old for this sort of thing?" she asked when Lee showed up at her first-aid trailer.

"I look older than I am," Lee said.

"How much did you pay my brother to sign up?"

"Seventy bucks American."

Lupe sighed quietly. "Take off your shirt."

She moved a cold stethoscope head over his chest and back, then wrapped a blood-pressure cuff around his arm. "You're white as milk," she said. "Don't you ever get out in the sun?"

"In a few days," he replied, "I'll be as brown as you are." She was standing very close to him, holding his arm under hers as she pumped up the cuff. There was a smell of sweet chili peppers about her, either on her breath or her hands, he couldn't tell which, but he didn't care because it was one of those bad-good smells that people enjoy without admitting it. Right now he was enjoying it. Their eyes met and held briefly, then shifted away in sudden awkwardness.

"You're okay physically, I guess," she said when she was finished. As he put his shirt back on, she sighed quietly again. "Look, I really think you ought to reconsider this. I can probably get my brother to give you back your entry fees. You're not in any shape to rodeo."

"I know that," Lee admitted. "But there's only one way to get in shape—that's to start doing it."

"You're going to kill yourself," she said, shaking her head.

"I hope not." Lee smiled. "Don't want to give your brother all that paperwork." Shoving his shirttail into his trousers, he asked, "Where do the cowboys bunk?"

"Little motel just on the edge of town. Called the Hidalgo Inn. Tell the manager you're with us."

Lee nodded his thanks and left.

After he checked in at the Hidalgo, Lee went across the street to a package store and bought a liter of La Riojana tequila, then crossed the street again and found an empty back booth next to a window in the motel coffee shop. Outside, it was just turning to

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dusk. He ordered a plate of *carne asada* and *refritos,* and a pitcher of Corona. The Corona came first, and Lee opened the bottle of tequila without removing it from the brown bag, took a drink, and chased it with the cold beer. Waiting for his supper, he rolled three cigarettes, lit one of them, and put the other two aside. No more smoking after tonight, he told himself. And no more beer. Just tequila. He was going to need the tequila, he knew, to help dull the terrible pain that would come from that first bronc ride and that first bull ride. It was going to be like being beaten up by Mike Tyson and then rolled down six flights of metal stairs. He'd be lucky to be able to lift the tequila bottle to his lips.

His supper came, a generous plate of tender filets of beef and another of refried beans under melted cheese, and a wrapped stack of warm flour tortillas. He fell to eating, fork in one hand, rolled tortilla in the other. He was about halfway through the meal, on his third drink of tequila, when a dirty, older-model white Cadillac convertible with its top down pulled to the curb opposite Lee's window, and Hazel got out on the passenger side. She stood on the sidewalk and looked at him through the window, not smiling, not frowning, more like *studying* him, for what seemed like the longest moment of his life. Then she said something to the driver, a big-armed man in a tight polo shirt, with styled steel-gray hair that matched hard, steel-gray eyes. The man nodded and Hazel came into the coffee shop. As she walked back to Lee's booth, five other guys in the place turned to look. The counterman turned to look. The fry cook came out of the kitchen to look. Hazel had that kind of body and that kind of walk. Even two Mexican women looked at her with more than passing interest.

Sitting across from him, Hazel said, "You look like hell, Lee."

"I been in prison, Hazel. Maybe you forgot."

"Now don't get nasty," she said quietly. She watched him take a drink from the paper-bag-wrapped bottle. "Tequila?" she asked.

"Tequila," he confirmed. He tilted his head slightly. "Lots of memories in a tequila bottle."

"Should you be drinking it straight?" she asked. "Just out of prison, I mean. Won't it knock you out?"

Lee grunted softly. "I drank more *in* prison than I ever drank in my life. We distilled our own pruno right in the laundry. Most of us were tight by noon. It was the only way we could stand the goddamned place."

Hazel's expression softened. "Was it bad, Lee?"

Lee's expression hardened. "No, Hazel, it was fun. It was Six Flags on a Saturday night. What the hell do you want, anyway?"

She looked out the window. The man in the car was watching them intently. "Ed Fox," she said. "Do you remember him?"

"How could I forget him, Hazel? He was the Immigration cop

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that arrested me at the border. In fact, he was the one who turned me over to the Mex cops, even though he busted me on the Texas side."

Hazel looked away. "Ed and I are married now. We got married right after my divorce from you became final." She paused then, as if expecting some kind of response from him, recrimination of some kind. But when she looked back, Lee had simply resumed eating. "Well," she added defensively, "you couldn't expect me to wait five years, could you?"

"Now that I think back, Hazel," he reflected, "I shouldn't have expected you to wait five days."

Hazel's expression went into neutral again. "All right, Lee, let's not be mean about this. Everybody makes mistakes: you, me, Ed, the President, the Pope, everybody. The smart thing to do is forgive and forget."

Lee grunted derisively and took another drink. Hazel rolled her eyes and nodded to the man in the car. Ed Fox got out of the convertible and came inside. The other people in the place looked at him, too. He was thick, muscular, macho, and he walked mean. They wouldn't look at Hazel again while he was around.

Sitting down next to Hazel, Fox looked at Lee with the same disdain that every cop and every prison guard and every parole officer had looked at every con and ex-con with since right and wrong were first written down. It was a look that said: I'm better than you, punk, and don't you ever forget it.

"How are you, Walsh?" he asked.

"Fine and dandy, Officer Fox," Lee said cheerfully. "Congratulations on your marriage. Got yourself a fine little woman there."

"Yeah, thanks," Fox replied drily. "And drop the 'officer' bit; I'm not with Immigration anymore. Quit that job after Hazel and I hooked up. I'm doing private security work now up in Houston. Commercial protection."

Glancing at Hazel, Lee smiled slightly. The guy was a mall cop. No wonder the Caddy was an older model. Probably picked it up secondhand. Like Hazel.

His ex-wife got down to business. "We're here to try to work out some kind of deal with you, Lee. Those uncut diamonds are no good at all to you right now. You're an ex-con with no connections and no possible way to turn them into cash. Anyone you approached, or any referral you might have been given by some other convict in Sweetwater, would see you in a minute for the hick you are and rip you off in a heartbeat—"

"And you and Ed here wouldn't do that to me, right?" Lee asked sarcastically.

"No, we wouldn't," Hazel stated emphatically. "We want to make a fair deal for a fair split, with you in on it every step of the way.

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Ed will arrange a meet with a fence, he'll go with you as backup to make sure you collect the cash, we'll all be together for a three-way split, then we'll go our separate ways with, I hope, no hard feelings. It's a sweet deal all around, Lee. Just meet us with the stones and—"

"I don't have those diamonds, Hazel. I never did," Lee told her flatly. "I ain't no thief."

Hazel and Ed Fox exchanged dubious glances.

"Look, Walsh," Ed Fox took over the negotiation, "let's try to be reasonable here, what say? We know you're not a thief, and we know you done time on a bum rap—nothing's gonna change that." He leaned forward on crossed arms. "Lookit. A wholesale gem merchant was robbed down in Monterrey by three guys: two Mexes and one white dude. They got away with three briefcases of stones: polished and set rubies, polished but uncut emeralds, and uncut diamonds. The rocks were transferred into paper bags about the size of the one you've got that bottle of yours in." He nodded at Lee's brown bag. "The perps headed east for Reynosa, hoping to cross the border into McAllen on the Tex side. The two Mexes were carrying the rubies and the emeralds, the white guy had the bag of diamonds. There was a description out on all three of them; by the time they got to Reynosa, the town was crawling with federal cops and soldiers. The two Mexes panicked and ditched the white guy. They tried to wetback it across the Rio Grande a few miles north and got busted—with their share of the loot still on them. Meantime, the white dude—who, incidentally, has never been caught—tried to lose himself at the Obregon Hotel, where a lot of fellow Americans, you included, were staying as part of a traveling rodeo that was playing a circuit from Tampico up to Ciudad Juarez. Maybe the guy was going to try and leave town as part of the rodeo company, I don't know. But the Mex cops had blocked all the hotel exits and started checking IDs, which is when he probably panicked too and decided to try something else. All the rodeo company luggage was piled on a couple of dollies in the lobby, waiting for the rodeo bus to come. What I think happened is the guy walked up, found a suitcase that wasn't locked, and put the bag of stones in it." Fox paused for the law-enforcement variety of dramatic effect, then added, "That suitcase was yours, Walsh."

"Remember, Lee, when we got to Ciudad Camargo late that afternoon," Hazel reminded him, "the luggage tag was missing from your bag? He must have taken it so he could find you later."

"That so?" said Lee. "How come he ain't here, then? He must want those diamonds as much as you two do."

"He'd probably've been waiting for you when you walked out the gates of Sweetwater pen," Fox guessed, "except he didn't know you were there. He thought you were still in a Mex prison."

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Lee's facial muscles tensed and his eyes, pale blue as a high desert sky, turned cold. "A Mex prison I never should've been in, in the first place."

"Don't start on that, Lee—" Hazel said urgently.

"Why the hell not? It's the truth, ain't it? I served the first two years of my sentence in a place called *Rata Grande Cárcel.* Know what that name means? It means the Jail of the Big Rats. It's out on the edge of Monclova where the zinc mines are. That's where the *gringo* cons worked—in the stinking zinc mines. And at night we got put into cells that had cyclone-fence doors with openings big enough for the mine rats to squeeze through. Those zinc-mine rats were as bit as a man's foot. They had tiny little saw-blade teeth that could gnaw through to a man's bones if he didn't wake up in time to slap them off. Wasn't unusual for a man to lose a little toe, or an ear lobe, or the tip of his nose." Lee glared at Ed Fox. "Two years, man. I spent two goddamn years in that hellhole before the Tex-Mex prisoner exchange got me out and sent me up to Sweetwater to do the rest of my sentence. Two years, *Officer* Fox. And all because when you stopped me at the gate between Ciudad Acuna, which is Mex, and Del Rio, which is Tex, and I didn't come up with the right answers about the diamonds, you shoved me back over the line to the Mex side and let the cops over there have me. Been left up to you, I would've done the whole five years in *Rata Grande."*

"Walsh, it wasn't supposed to be that way," Fox told him adamantly. "The Mex cops were just supposed to work you over for a couple of days, soften you up, and then I was going to come over and get you out: make a deal with you for half of the rocks and split with the Mex cops. Only it didn't work out that way. The gem merchant that got robbed had some influence with the *Districo Federales* down in Mexico City; he wanted all three of the guys who robbed him put away as a lesson to other hotshot *bandidos* who might try to pull the same thing. The border cops hustled you south before I even knew it. And then the court gave the two Mex holdup men lighter sentences to say the third guy was you. The whole thing just snowballed."

Hazel reached over and touched Lee's arm. "That's the reason I never came to see you down there, Lee," she said. "I was afraid if I stepped across the Mex line, they'd grab me as an accomplice or something—"

"And after the prisoner exchange, when I was up in Sweetwater?" he challenged.

She shrugged. "By then I had hooked up with Ed. Didn't seem right to visit you after that."

"Oh, but it's okay now that I'm out. Because now you think you're gonna get something out of it. Well, you're wrong. I don't

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have those diamonds. Never did."

"Come on, Walsh. I searched your suitcase five days later when you tried to cross with your rodeo outfit from Ciudad Acuna to Del Rio, where I was assigned. I found a paper bag under your clothes that had a single uncut diamond stuck in the inside bottom seam."

Now it was Lee who shrugged. "Maybe the real thief kept the diamonds and just planted the bag."

"Lee, stop playing games," Hazel said sharply. "You had those diamonds when the rodeo left Reynosa, and you didn't have them in Ciudad Acuna when we were crossing back into the States at Del Rio. Between those two points, the rodeo played Ciudad Camargo, Nuevo Laredo, and Piedras Negras. At those stops there were border crossings into Texas at Rio Grande City, Laredo, and Eagle Pass. Everybody was talking about how tight the checkpoints were; Mexican police were still looking for the third holdup man, the *gringo.* You hid those stones somewhere in one of those border towns on the Mex side." Hazel leaned forward and drilled him with a stare. "We've been following you, Lee; we saw you go into the office of that two-bit greaser rodeo. You signed on, didn't you? You signed on *because it's taking the exact same route.* It's a perfect cover for you to go back and collect the fortune that was dropped into your lap. You figure you've got it coming; you paid for it with five years of your life. The only problem, Lee, is you can't do it by yourself. You're not smart enough, and you don't have the connections to fence the stuff. You *need* Ed and me. It's that simple."

Lee swallowed the last bite of his *refritos,* washed it down with one more swallow of tequila, capped the bagged bottle and slipped it inside his shirt. He stood up, just a tad unsteadily.

"I'm really touched by your wanting to help me, Hazel. You too, Ed. I really 'preciate it. I do, yessir. On'y one thing wrong with the deal. I don't have the diamonds."

He smiled a happy-face smile and walked out of the coffee shop.

At six the next morning, Lee had breakfast in the same coffee shop with a dozen other rodeoers, all but two of them Mex, the two *gringos* being lanky young ranch-hand types, probably down from Texas trying their luck at something better than bunkhouse wages. When Lee set his food tray down on the table, the two white boys slid down their opposite benches to join him. One's name was Chris; the other was called Bobo.

"Just joinin' up?" asked Chris, who was clean-cut and looked like his first shave was still to come.

"Yeah." Lee nodded.

"Whatcha in?" asked Bobo, who was round-faced and freckled.

"Broncs and bulls."

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The two youths exchanged glances that said: *Is he joking?* Lee smiled at their looks.

"Yeah, I know: I'm out of shape. But I can rodeo, boys. Wait a few days and see. How long you two been on?"

"Near a month," said Chris. "We come south with the outfit on a circuit from Sinaloa down to Veracruz. Then we signed on again for the run back north."

"Picking up good prize money?" Lee asked around a mouthful of *huevos rancheros.*

Bobo smiled. "We're making a little. Mostly we've been staying on for the Buckle Bunnies."

Lee smiled again. Buckle Bunnies. He hadn't heard that term in a long time. Buckle Bunnies were the young Mex and *gringo* groupies who followed the circuits, chasing rodeo thrills in the afternoon and wild cowboys with big belt buckles at night.

"How are the broncs in the outfit?" Lee asked, chewing a bite of chicken-fried breakfast steak.

"Average to good," said Chris. Lee knew that good meant bad.

"And the bulls?"

"Good to way good. There's one named Dracula that, when he throws you, tries to gore you so he can lick your blood."

"You won't get him for at least a week," Bobo assured Lee. "Valdo, the boss, is pretty fair when it comes to rotating the bulls and the riders. He'll start you out on the easy ones."

"Good to know." Lee nodded. "Is there a hawker with the outfit?"

"Yeah. Works out of a green Dodge van. Got about ever'thing you need."

After breakfast, the men straggled out toward the edge of town. On the way, Lee saw the Cadillac parked nearby, Ed Fox behind the wheel, watching him. At the fiesta grounds, Lee checked out the animals held in two traveling corrals. It was easy to spot Dracula; he was big, black, mean-eyed, drooling foam, punching dirt with his ragged front hooves, kicking at the pen fence with his hind legs. Lee figured that right now, the shape he was in, he'd last maybe two seconds on Dracula. You had to last eight to get prize money.

Seeing a green Dodge van off to the side, Lee ambled over and went up to a paunchy little man about fifty sitting in a folding aluminum rocking chair under a tattered awning that pulled out from the van's roof and stood on two poles.

"You this outfit's hawker?" Lee asked.

"You bet. Name's Petrie. What can I do you for?"

"Need some Wranglers, thick socks, chaps—"

"You came to the right man, brother. Step right back here—"

Petrie slid open the side door of the van to display cardboard boxes of jeans, shirts, belts, boots, chaps, hats, gloves—a virtual

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plethora of cowboy merchandise.

" 'Bout a thirty-four waist?" he asked.

After stocking up on just enough to get him through his first week, because he knew he'd be a different size after a few days of riding—that is, if he was still alive—Lee stopped by Valdo's trailer to draw his animals. Valdo was out, but his sister, Lupe, the nurse, was there. She glanced at his box of new gear.

"Guess you're not here to get your entry fees back?"

"Nope. Just want to get my draws for today."

"Still determined to commit suicide?"

Lee set the box on Valdo's desk and stepped over to where Lupe was sorting papers into the open drawer of an old filing cabinet.

"You always try to discourage the new help?"

Lupe shrugged. "I try to do the right thing when I can. It's a character flaw." She turned past him to the desk and Lee leaned a little closer to her to see if she still had the smell of sweet chili peppers on her, but she didn't; it was more like musk now and he knew she hadn't showered yet that day. "Your bull is Pepe," Lupe said, looking at a schedule. "He's the easiest of the herd. My brother picks your bulls for the first few days for breaking in; after that, you'll go on the regular rotation list. I hope you get in shape quick."

"I will. What about my bronc?"

"They don't have names, just numbers. You get whichever one they bridle out. They're all about the same; none of them real competition stock. My brother keeps them in the show mainly for entertainment. None of them are unbroken; they're the same animals we use in the barrel racing and calf wrestling. When we want them to buck, we cinch rawhide around their balls. That does the trick every time."

"I guess it would," Lee said, grimacing. He picked up his box. "I guess I'll see you after the show."

"You will *definitely* see me after the show," she said emphatically, "if you're still alive, that is." Then her voice softened. "Good luck."

"Thanks," Lee said, winking.

As he walked back into town, the Cadillac pulled up next to him, Hazel now at the wheel, Ed Fox no longer in the car. "Lee, are you seriously going to try rodeoing this afternoon?" she asked, slowing the car to a crawl next to him.

"Buy a ticket and find out," he replied without pausing.

"You're going to get yourself killed."

"What's that to you?"

"Well, we *were* married at one time. For God's sake, Lee. I mean, this is so *pointless*. We could all start living very comfortable lives if you'd just share those damned diamonds!"

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"Can't share what I don't have, Hazel," he said flatly.

Hazel threw a mouthful of obscenities at him and drove on. She was parked across the street from the motel when he got there.

At four that afternoon, in front of a sellout crowd, Valdo's Rodeo El Grande began. A local mariachi band provided music for the entry parade. That was followed by a bareback riding demonstration, which was followed by a fancy-roping exhibition.

The first competition was calf roping, which had eight contestants, including Chris and Bobo, the two Texas kids Lee had met at breakfast. Bobo took second money and Chris cashed out.

"Nice job," Lee told Bobo back of the chutes.

"Thanks. See you got outfitted."

"Yeah." Lee grinned and looked down at his new Wranglers, snap shirt, wide leather belt, and stiff new roughout boots with riding heels. Reaching up, he adjusted his new cowboy straw hat. "I feel like a store-window dummy."

"You won't for long," said Bobo.

Chris came over and the three of them put elbows up on a chute guard to watch the steer-wrestling competition, which none of them were in. It was an all-Mex contest, with first money going to a short but powerfully built young man named Hector.

"Dude's good," said Bobo.

"I'll say," Chris seconded. "Which is why we weren't entered."

The clowns put on a show then, which led to an intermission ending the first half of the show. During the break, as the audience moved about and milled around the taco and burrito and beer stands, Lee saw Hazel and Ed Fox up in the cheap seats, keeping an eye on him. Back of the chutes, Lupe was busy at her first-aid trailer, patching up a few skinned elbows and knees from the first two competitions. And getting ready for the last half and most anticipated part of the rodeo—and the most dangerous: saddle bronc riding and bull riding.

Lee left the two Texas boys and found himself an uncluttered area next to the first-aid trailer, where he began doing stretching and bending exercises to loosen up tendons and muscles that in a scant few minutes—and for a scant few punishing *seconds*—were going to be severely tested. He had thought about doing some exercises in his motel room the previous night but decided against it; it would have left him too sore today. For now, he just did some waist twists, toe touches to loosen his lower back, and deep knee bends to wake up his thighs. Lupe noticed him through the window and came out of her trailer.

"Let me show you some better ones," she said. She put her hands on his shoulders. "Sit—" She had him sit on the ground and hug his knees up to his chest. "Now flex your arms—squeeze—

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okay, rock back and bring your feet off the ground—yes, that's it. Roll back just enough to keep your balance—okay, flex and squeeze—good. How's that feel?"

"Feels okay," Lee said, letting her help pull him to his feet. He held on to her hand after he got up. "How would you like to be my personal trainer?"

"You can't afford me," Lupe said, smiling, pulling her hand away.

"Okay, how 'bout we just get married? Then you can cook for me, too. And, you know, we can do other things—"

Those eyes of hers that were as deep as forever took on a sparkle. "I don't like to cook. And we don't have to be married to do the other things. Anyway, there might not be enough left of you to be worthwhile after the bronc and bull finish with you."

He watched her walk back to the trailer door. She had a nice long stride. Lee liked a woman with a nice long stride.

A trumpet sounded the end of the intermission. Spectators began returning to their seats. Lee saw Hazel and Ed Fox again. He walked over to the chutes where the broncs were being saddled and loosely testicle-looped—a loop that would be tightened considerably in the chute.

Lee was rider number four; he got in line behind three Mex competitors. Hector, the steer-wrestling winner, was in front of him.

"Nice job on that steer," Lee said.

"Thanks, *amigo,*" Hector replied.

The action began as rider number one came out of the chute, the clock above the local judges box began to run, and the crowd started to cheer. The judging on this competition, because it was a gypsy show and nonregulated, was a combination of points given to the bronc for how mean it was, and the rider for how long he stayed in the saddle. It was entirely subjective; there were a couple of local politicians in the box, but Valdo actually did the judging, and he saw that his regular riders shared pretty much in the prize money.

Almost before Lee knew it, Hector, the third rider, was out, there was a pat on Lee's shoulder, and he was climbing the rails to lower himself onto a saddle bronc, smoothing a new pigskin glove over his right hand and gripping the braided handle of the hornless saddle. Sweat burst out on his entire body, down to the bottoms of his feet, but his mouth went sand dry and he could not even wet his lips. He waited.

Hector stayed up as long as he thought he had to for prize money, then abruptly slipped off and got out of kicking range. Two cowboys lassoed the bronc and one of them quickly uncinched the testicle loop, immediately calming the bucking horse.

The arena floor was cleared for the next rider. Lee glanced up at Hazel and Ed Fox, looked over his shoulder in time to get two

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thumbs-ups from the Texas boys, saw Lupe coming up to a bleacher seat to watch but not sitting down—and then he felt the bronc jump forward as the loop was tightened and the chute door opened.

It was over in eleven seconds. Eleven jarring, jolting, jerky, shaky, shuddering, shattering seconds—like a car wreck. Followed by a plunge and a crash as he was thrown off to the left while the bronc turned right. Fortunately, he instinctively remembered how to fall. Hector rushed out to help him up.

"Anything broke, *amigo?*" the Mexican cowboy asked urgently.

Lee shook his head. "Don't think so . . ."

He managed to walk back to the staging area where he found Lupe already waiting for him with a folding chair. "Sit," she ordered. "Take off your shirt." She checked him quickly for possible broken bones, finding none. Then from a gallon bottle she splashed witch-hazel liniment over his bare upper body and began to knead his neck, shoulders, arms, and back.

"You do this for all the riders?" Lee asked.

"No, just the retarded ones."

"What kind of treatment do I get after I ride the bull?"

Lupe grunted. "You? Probably embalming." She tossed him a towel to dry off with.

It seemed to Lee that the time between the bronc and bull competitions went by inordinately fast. One minute he had been feeling Lupe's strong, soothing fingers on his bare skin, and the next she and the folding chair were gone and he was back behind the chutes preparing to straddle two thousand pounds of angry bull. Like the broncs, the bulls were encouraged to be mean: a shank girdle of rough hemp was cinched around the bull's body just in front of its hind legs, pinning its considerable genitals tightly to its belly. A riding rope encircled the animal just behind the hump at the top of its spine; that rope, commonly called the bull rope, had a five-inch loop fashioned in it for the rider's gloved hand to hold on to, while the other hand, above his head, swung wildly as the free arm struggled for body balance to withstand the bull's powerful bucking catapults. The competition of man against bull was such a staggering mismatch that a rider had to remain on the raging animal's back a mere eight seconds for prize money.

When it was Lee's turn, he straddled the planks of the chute above Pepe, leaned over to work his hand into the bull-rope loop, pulled his hat down to his eyebrows, eased his body onto the bull's back, and nodded to the gate man.

The gate swung open and out burst Pepe, leaping into the air, then crashing down so hard on his front hooves that Lee felt the impact in his spleen. Digging those front hooves into the ground, the bull reversed its entire body in a backward lurch that jarred

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Lee's jaw, then swung its hindquarters to the left—sending Lee propelling to the right side like a beer can thrown out a pickup truck window.

Lee was on the ground in three seconds.

As he limped back behind the chutes, his lips formed a slight smile. He had done it. And it felt *good.*

The second afternoon was harder because Lee went in stiff from the previous day; he did more poorly on both the bronc and his second ride on Pepe. Then, on the third day, the rodeo's last show in Matamoros, he did better again, but not by much, only managing to equal the first day's rides. But at the end of each day, he felt good again, knowing with certainty now that he could still rodeo, and rodeo well, with time.

That night, when he went into the cafe for supper, he was again joined by Hazel and Ed Fox. Hazel scrutinized an abrasion on the heel of his left hand, another along his right jaw line, and a purplish bruise on his right cheek.

"Well?" she asked caustically. "Have you had enough of this stupid game?"

Lee shrugged innocently. "Man's got to make a living, Hazel."

"I can't believe you're doing this, Lee. A fortune in uncut diamonds hidden away somewhere and you go through all this rodeo bullshit just to try to keep from sharing them with us so we can all get better off." She sighed dramatically. "Look, Ed and I have talked it over. We'll forget about the three equal shares; instead, we'll agree to split it right down the middle: fifty-fifty. What do you say?"

Lee stared blandly at her. "I ain't got them diamonds, Hazel."

Angrily, Hazel stood, Ed Fox rising beside her.

"Know what's going to happen, Lee?" she spat. "You're going to get yourself killed out in some arena and then we're all going to lose!"

The two of them stalked out, leaving Lee to his chili con carne and tortillas.

Early the next morning, Valdo's Rodeo El Grande packed up, and that afternoon made the fifty-mile trip north to its next show date, two days in Rio Bravo. Riding in the back of one of the trucks, Lee saw Hazel and Ed Fox pass the caravan in their dirty white Caddy with the top down. He smiled and waved; Hazel rolled her eyes while Fox ignored him.

In Rio Bravo, Valdo told him that his breaking-in period only had two more days to go, because despite his poor performances, he obviously was an experienced rodeoer and would have to join in the regular rotation of the bulls; no more getting Pepe every time

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out. For the two shows in Rio Bravo, however, he would let Lee ride Little César. "He's a young bull," Valdo assured him. "Strong but not as crafty. And not as mean. I think you can handle him."

Before the first performance, Lupe took him to her first-aid trailer to pad and tape his right rib cage, which was badly bruised from his three rides on Pepe. "When you ride Little César," she advised, "try to fall to the left for a change."

"I'll see if I can arrange that with the bull," Lee replied wryly.

The first afternoon in Rio Bravo, Lee again saw Hazel and Ed Fox in the bleachers. He had noticed the white Caddy the previous night at the motel where the rodeo people were lodged. It was becoming pretty obvious that they were not going to let up on him about the diamonds.

His bronc ride that day seemed easier, even though he only lasted ten seconds—one second shy of the miserable record he set in Matamoros. Then, on the bull ride, he managed to last five seconds on Little César, but landed painfully on his left shoulder, spraining his left posterior deltoid.

On the second day, he hung in for only nine seconds on the bronc, and because the diminished deltoid reduced his ability to swing his arm in the air for balance, only made three seconds on Little César.

"Congratulations," Lupe said as she packed crushed ice on his shoulder after the show.

"For what?"

"I didn't think you could do any worse, but you did."

After the treatment, as he was heading out the door putting on his shirt, Lupe asked, "Want a nice massage and backrub at bedtime tonight?"

Lee turned back with a wide smile. "Sure!"

"Who doesn't?" she said with a straight face.

Piqued, Lee went away, muttering, "And I thought the bulls were mean."

As Lee shuffled his way back uptown to the motel, Ed Fox fell in beside him. "Rough day?" he asked.

"Like you care," Lee answered.

Fox stepped around to block his way. "Look, we got a problem between us, but that don't mean we can't be civil. Let me buy you a drink. You look like you could use one."

Lee thought about it for a moment. Fox was right: He *could* use one. "Why not?" he said.

They went into the first cantina they came to and sat at the bar. Lee, still on his breaking-in regimen, ordered a Corona beer.

"You know," Fox said, after he downed a straight Finlandia and ordered another, "this is all Hazel's idea. She's positive you know where those diamonds are. Me, I ain't never been all that convinced. I kind of liked your theory that maybe the *gringo* perp only

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planted the paper bag and one diamond, hoping you'd get nailed while he beat it with the rest of the haul. That would explain the call we got."

"What call?"

"At Del Rio Immigration. It was anonymous, some guy, just said an American would be trying to cross from Ciudad Acuna that day with the rodeo, he'd have a bag without a luggage tag, and he'd be carrying the stolen gems taken in the Monterrey heist. That's why I pulled you out of the Customs line, that call." Fox sipped at his second drink. "Sure wish you'd had those rocks on you, Walsh. You and I could have worked a deal right then and there, we'd both have made a lot of money, and you'd never have done a day in the joint."

"Yeah, but then you wouldn't have met Hazel," Lee pointed out. "How *did* you meet her, anyway?"

"She came into the station a few days later to ask about going into Mexico to see you. I advised her against it. Told her it'd be too easy for them to bust her as an accessory." Fox took another sip. "Then I asked her out."

"Is that when you stopped trying to get me back to the Del Rio side?"

"I'll level with you, Walsh. After I met Hazel, I didn't give a damn what they did with you."

Lee grunted softly. "Hazel makes a hell of a first impression, all right."

"Does she ever," Fox agreed. Leveling his gaze at Lee, he added, "She won't give up on this, you know."

"I know," Lee admitted quietly.

The next day, the outfit packed up to move again, this time to Reynosa, where five years earlier the nightmare with the diamonds had begun. Valdo's crew, however, did not stay at the Obregon Hotel as had the members of the upscale rodeo Lee had been with at the time; instead, they filled a less expensive little motel close to the fairgrounds at the edge of town.

They played three days in Reynosa. Lee did not know if the place had a psychological effect on him or not, but he did begin to markedly improve his performance there. The first day, he held on fourteen seconds on the bronc, and on an older bull named Papacita, he managed six seconds. The second day he made fifteen seconds on the bronc, six again on a bull named Bruno. Then, on the third day, he accomplished what he felt was his breakthrough: nineteen seconds on a bronc, and seven seconds on a strong bull called Meatball.

Chris, Bobo, and Hector all heaped praise on him after his ride the last day.

"Good job, *amigo!*" said Hector.

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"You coming around, dude," Bobo praised.

"Man's ready for Dracula," said Chris, referring to the most feared bull in the herd.

"The day I draw Dracula's the day I prob'ly quit," Lee laughed.

In the first-aid trailer, when he had his shirt off for his post-ride exam, Lupe said, "You're not so white anymore."

"Been lying out by the pool every morning. Told you I'd be as brown as you, didn't I?"

"Yeah, well, you've got a ways to go, *gringo,"* she told him. "How's your muscle?"

"Which one?" he asked innocently.

"The deltoid, funny man." Lupe could not entirely suppress a smile.

"It's okay. A day of rest tomorrow and by the time we get up to Ciudad Camargo, I'll be ready to go after me a little prize money."

"Don't get your hopes too high," Lupe cautioned. "You've got some bad bulls coming up."

"Yeah," he said gloomily, "and I've got a bankroll that's going down."

It had cost him four hundred ninety dollars so far in entry fees to get back in shape. Plus about forty a day to live on, was another four hundred. He had come out of Sweetwater with fourteen hundred and twenty dollars; he was down now to a little over five hundred.

Lupe saw the concern in his eyes. Impulsively, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Don't worry. You'll probably pick up some prize money in Camargo."

Lee lightened up at once. "You ever thought about getting glasses?"

"No, why?" she asked, frowning.

"That kiss. You missed my lips by at least four inches."

"Get out of here, you," she said, pushing him toward the door, again with a little smile she couldn't screen.

Hazel was waiting for him at the motel, leaning casually next to the door to his room, smoking a cigarette.

"Them cigarettes'll kill you, Hazel," Lee said, unlocking the door.

"What does it matter, Lee? You're ruining my life anyway."

Here it comes, Lee thought. The Meryl Streep number.

"Leave the door open," he instructed as she followed him inside. "In case that hulk you're married to comes by, I wouldn't want him to get the wrong idea."

Hazel sat on the bed, crossing her legs, showing some thigh. "Remember the last time we were in Reynosa? Remember that last night together? The tequila. Dragging the mattress onto the floor because that damn bed squeaked so bad. Remember how we—"

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"I remember everything, Hazel," he interrupted. "What do you want?"

"You *know* what I want."

"What you want, I ain't got." He stripped off his shirt. She winced at the sight of the bruises and lacerations on his body.

"Stop this crazy business, Lee," she pleaded. "Get the diamonds and let's make some money."

"Don't have the diamonds, Hazel. Never have had."

"You're a liar, Lee," she told him evenly. "You had them in Ciudad Camargo. I saw them in your suitcase when you were in the shower."

Lee stared at her. "I don't believe you." As soon as he said it, Lee knew she had him.

Hazel smirked. "Why didn't you say I *couldn't* have seen them, Lee? Couldn't have seen them because you never had them? Why did you say you didn't believe I saw them?"

Lee's shoulders sagged. Sighing quietly, he sat down on the bed next to her, but not touching. He stared at the floor.

"It's okay, baby," Hazel said, reaching out to pat his leg. She saw Ed Fox standing silently in the open doorway, and jerked her head in a gesture for him to leave before Lee noticed him. Then she put her arm around Lee's bare shoulders. "Let's get this game over with, Lee," she almost purred. "Where are the diamonds?"

"Ciudad Camargo," he said quietly. "There's a kids' playground down the street from the Hotel Revolución where we were staying. I put them in a tequila bottle and buried it down there while you were asleep that night."

"A tequila bottle," Hazel said softly, shaking her head incredulously. "Full of uncut diamonds. Buried in a little-kids' playground."

"Why didn't you ever tell Fox you knew for sure?" Lee asked.

Hazel shrugged. "I was never real positive I could trust Ed. And, frankly, I thought maybe you and I might make a deal just for the two of us. But seeing how you are since prison—well, I think I better play safe and hang on to Ed." Leaning over, she kissed him lightly on the abrasion healing on his cheek. "Okay, here's what we'll do." She got down to business, rising. "I'll have Ed cross over to McAllen tonight and hop a flight up to Houston. It'll probably take him a day or so to find a reliable fence that he can bring back to meet us in Ciudad Camargo. You travel on up to Camargo with your greaser rodeo. Try not to get killed in your first couple of days of competition. Soon as Ed and the buyer get to Camargo, we'll dig up the tequila bottle, make the sale, and split the money three ways—"

"You said fifty-fifty," Lee reminded her.

"Yeah, honey, but that was before you caused us all the trouble you did. I mean, you've made a nervous wreck out of me, Ed's ulcer has been giving him fits, we've had ten extra days of expense—"

"Okay, okay." Lee waved a hand for her to shut up. There was no

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winning an argument with Meryl Streep. "Where will you be while all this is going on?" he asked.

"Keeping an eye on you, sugar," Hazel winked and smiled. "I'll give Ed the good news and get things rolling." At the door, she paused and looked back, studying him for a moment, wondering how much the five years in prison had taken out of him as a man. There had been a time when the two of them—

"Listen, Lee," she said, in a voice turning throaty, "Ed will be gone at least two nights. Maybe we could get together. You know, for a drink. Or something."

Without waiting for an answer, she was gone.

Valdo's rodeo packed up the next morning and headed north for Ciudad Camargo. Lee rode in the pickup truck that Lupe drove, pulling her first-aid trailer behind. She looked fresh and clean in a sleeveless yellow blouse and cutoff jeans, her black hair shiny and braided, legs and feet bare except for sandals.

"I've got some stuff to eat back there if we get hungry," she said, bobbing her chin at a red Krispy Cooler ice chest behind the driver's seat.

"Great," Lee said.

"You know," she said as they drove, "if you can start picking up prize money in Camargo, and do well for the rest of the circuit, you might still come out ahead by the time we get to Monterrey. Then on the next circuit, from there down to Guadalajara, there'll be bigger crowds and bigger prizes. You could make yourself some pretty good money."

"What makes you think I'll start picking up prize money in Camargo?" he asked drily. "Up to now you been saying I was gonna get killed."

Lupe shrugged. "You're getting so much better all of a sudden. It's pretty obvious that you've got a lot of experience. My brother says it's just a matter of time before you're the best bull and bronc rider in the crew."

"Well, he's right about that," Lee admitted without bluster. "And I'm pretty sure I'll start picking up prize money in Camargo." He looked out the window at the west side of the Rio Grande, which the highway followed. As far as the next circuit was concerned, he knew he wouldn't be around for that. After he got his share of the money for the diamonds, he'd hang around maybe as far as Piedras Negras, two stops up from Ciudad Camargo. Then he'd be long gone.

Lupe was quiet for several minutes, then said, "You know, I'm leaving the rodeo in Monterrey."

"Leaving? You?" He was surprised. "How can your brother get along without you?"

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"He has another nurse coming on in Nuevo Laredo to replace me. I've only worked for him long enough to save the money I need to go back home and open a little nursing clinic. And to take care of my grandfather, who's getting very old."

"Where's home?" Lee asked.

"San Filipe. It's down in the Yucatan. That's where my brother and I grew up. Our grandparents raised us. Now there's just my grandfather left. He has a little fishing boat, but it's pretty hard for him to make a living now. We send him money every week. But he needs someone to look after him."

"So what's this nursing thing you're talking about?"

"In most of the poorer villages in Mexico there are no doctors. To see a doctor, people sometimes have to travel many miles. So the government allows licensed nurses to operate nursing clinics to provide primary non-physician care. Only thing is, the government won't *establish* the clinic; the village must raise the money for that itself. And the village must also hire and pay a nurse to run it. After that, the government will step in and replenish whatever medical supplies the clinic needs."

"Couldn't you do a lot better for yourself working in some big hospital in Mexico City or someplace? Take your grandfather to live with you there?"

"Sure," Lupe admitted, "but that's not what I want. I want to take care of my grandfather in his own village, not in some big, smoggy city. And I want to improve life in the village where I grew up. Many of the girls I went to school with are now mothers with little children who probably aren't getting proper medical attention. I want to give something back to my village."

Lee looked out the window again. He wanted to tell Lupe what a special person he thought she was, how different and—*finer* he found her. For all her smart mouth and sarcasm, she was probably the best woman he had ever met. But he did not have the words to say those things to her, or to anyone. In all his life he had been but a cotton sharecropper's son, a high-school dropout, a rodeo rider, and a convict. Not a very good foundation for serious expression.

Halfway to Ciudad Camargo, Lupe had Lee reach back and open the ice chest so they could eat. As he twisted around in the passenger seat, he was close enough to detect the scent of her freshly shampooed hair, and a slight muskiness from under her sleeveless blouse. He took his time getting out the food and she smiled slightly, knowingly, without taking her eyes off the road.

She had brought refried bean dip, chili-cheese Fritos, cold chorizo links, salsa, and Dr Peppers. Lee spread it all on a tray that folded out between them from under the dashboard. Lupe turned on the radio and they began eating just as Willie Nelson started singing "On the Road Again."

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Looking at each other, they laughed together. Then they joined in the song. They sang on and off for the rest of the trip.

The next day, in Ciudad Camargo, Lee won second-prize money in bronc riding, and third-prize money in bull riding—on a fairly tough bull named Manolo. Chris, Bobo, Hector, and all the other rodeoers crowded around to shake his hand and pat him on the back. Lee felt elated; to last the full eight seconds on a reasonably good bull was just short of exhilarating. Even Valdo made a point of personally congratulating him.

After the show, as he was helping carry the saddles, ropes, and other gear to the tack truck, Hazel broke away from the departing crowd and came over to him.

"Well, it looks like you can still rodeo," she said.

"Yeah, looks like," Lee replied. He glanced around, hoping Lupe did not see Hazel.

"Want to celebrate tonight?"

"Can't." He shook his head. "That bull gave me a little twist of hernia," he lied. "I gotta stretch out with ice packs tonight or I won't be able to ride tomorrow."

"Oh. Well, I'm sorry—"

"Yeah, me too, Hazel. What do you hear from your husband?"

Hazel's expression tightened a little; there was something in his voice she didn't quite like. "He called me on my cell phone a little while ago. He's got a line on somebody he thinks will be real interested. They'll meet in the morning."

"Good. The sooner we get this deal over with, the better."

"My feeling exactly," said Hazel. She nodded curtly. "Enjoy your ice packs tonight."

When the tack work was finished, the crew dispersed and Lee joined several others to straggle over to Valdo's office trailer to collect their prize money. After he got paid, he was walking past the first-aid trailer as Lupe came out and locked the door behind her.

"Who was the blonde?" she asked, falling in beside him.

"What blonde?"

"You know what blonde."

"Oh, her." He shrugged. "Just a woman who wanted to say how much she liked the show."

Lupe really had no reason to disbelieve him—except that he did not look her in the eye when he said it. But she gave him the benefit of the doubt.

"You going for supper?" she asked.

"Yeah, after I clean up."

"Want some company? I can wait for you."

"Sure, if you don't mind."

"Okay. It shouldn't take you long to shower now that you're get-

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ting so skinny. How much weight have you lost?"

"Twelve pounds."

"About eight more and you'll be looking good."

"Yeah, how good?"

"Good enough," she teased. But added, "Maybe."

At the motel, as he took Lupe into his room, Lee saw Hazel sitting across the street in the Cadillac, watching. So much for the hernia excuse.

Lupe stretched out on the bed and watched television while Lee got cleaned up. Then they left the room and walked down Calle Vista toward the Cafe Florian. Hazel was still watching; to Lee's relief, Lupe apparently didn't notice her.

On the way to the cafe, they walked past the children's playground where Lee had buried the tequila bottle.

At the cafe, Chris, Bobo, and Hector were at a table, eating and drinking with five Buckle Bunnies, three *gringo* and two Mex, all young, fresh-faced, wearing short shorts and sexy tops. Valdo and some of the rest of the crew were also in the place, eating together at a large table. Lupe ignored everyone and led Lee to a small booth.

"Will your brother mind us eating together?" Lee asked.

Lupe shook her head. "My brother and I have an understanding. I do what I want to do."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me," Lee said wryly.

They spent a couple of hours at supper, then walked back outside to a warm, pleasant night with just a hint of a breeze bringing the fragrance of rosewood trees slightly moistened by the nearby Rio Grande. They stood for an undecided moment until Lee said, "I'll walk you back. Don't want to leave a poor little helpless thing like you out alone at night."

"What a guy."

But she took his arm as they strolled toward the edge of town.

At the door to her trailer, Lupe said, "Come on in. I've got a bottle of brandy."

Her living quarters were in the separated rear of the trailer: a sitting room, a little sleeping alcove, a pullman kitchen and counter, and a bath-shower combination. "Nice," Lee said.

"It's okay." Almost noncommittal. "Frankly, I'll be glad to get out of here." Her face brightened. "You should see my grandfather's house in San Filipe. All made of stone. He built it himself, a room at a time; my brother and I helped him every day after school, after he brought his boat in and sold the day's catch. The rooms have granite floors. A verandah faces the sea. When I get there, I'm going to have a new red-tile roof put on."

Lee sat on a loveseat and Lupe brought over a bottle of Bardinet and two glasses. Before she sat beside him, she turned on a small CD player nearby and soft Spanish music by Benise began to play.

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As they sipped the brandy, Lupe continued to talk of her childhood and grandparents.

"My mom and dad, things didn't work out too good for them," she told him. "My dad could play the guitar a little and my mom could sing a little, so they decided to go on the road and become famous—you know, the Captain and Tenille, only Mexican. My grandparents told them to go, only don't even think about taking my brother and me. So they left and went to Mérida and Campeche and Villahermosa, playing wherever they could find work. They sent postcards. By the time they got as far as Veracruz, both of them were into drinking and drugs. After a while, the postcards stopped. When my brother turned eighteen, my grandfather gave him some money and told him to go find them. Turned out my mother had overdosed on something in Orizaba, and my dad had been stabbed to death in a drunken brawl in Tampico. It was while my brother was on that trip that he got a job with a traveling rodeo. Eight years later he owned it. He sent money home and my grandparents made me use some of it to go to nursing school in Mexico City. I got a good education there. . . ."

Lupe paused and for a long moment stared into space. Then she took a long swallow of the brandy and continued.

"A *real* good education. I was the classic simple village girl in the big city. When I came home, I wasn't a girl anymore and I sure as hell wasn't simple any longer. But I *was* a nurse."

"From what I've seen," said Lee, "you learned to take care of yourself okay."

"I did that, all right." Lupe capped the brandy bottle. "No more of this for you tonight. You're riding Dracula tomorrow."

Lee felt his stomach tighten. Dracula. The bull that liked to lick its rider's blood. "How do you know?"

"I saw the draw list."

Visibly unnerved, Lee rose to leave. "Thanks for the drink. And the company."

Lupe followed him into the front of the trailer.

"Would you like a nice rubdown before you go to bed?"

Lee looked back with a grin. "I already fell for that one, Lupe."

"No, I mean it this time." She patted the examination table. "Come on. I'll make you feel real good."

Warily, still not sure of her, Lee took off his shirt.

"Your jeans, too," she said. "I'll do your legs, feet, everything."

Stripping down to his briefs, he lay facedown on the black leather table. In his peripheral vision he saw Lupe remove her blouse and come toward him in a sheer white bra, a bottle of lotion in one hand. The next moment, the smell of lavender and lemon grass wafted into his nostrils and he felt her surprisingly strong fingers gently kneading the lotion into his sore, abused body.

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Before long he said, "I'm sorry, I can't lie on my stomach anymore."

"I know. It's all right. Turn over."

Lee rolled onto his back, his briefs cutting tightly. Lupe turned out all the lights except a hazy yellow one above the door, then returned to him, the lotion still fragrant on her hands.

"Let me help you—"

The next day, Lee opted out of the bronc competition to devote himself wholly to riding Dracula. He had watched others come out of the chute on the brute of a bull that everyone dreaded. Bobo had stayed on him six seconds, Chris only five, and Hector, generally considered the best all-around rodeoer in the bunch, had stayed seven seconds and flown over the horns a mere split-instant before the eight-second whistle sounded. The previous day, Dracula had thrown a better-than-average rodeoer named Diaz in five seconds, then proceeded to gore him in the left buttock and lick at the blood that seeped through ripped denim before arena personnel sprayed pepper water in his face to back him off. Today, the crowd was back to see what Dracula would do next.

Waiting his turn to ride, sitting on the ground doing the stretch exercises Lupe had taught him, Lee looked up to see her come out of the trailer and walk over to him with that purposeful stride of hers that he loved to watch. He got to his feet.

"Hi, cowboy," she said, smiling.

"Hi, nurse."

"How're you feeling today?"

"Like I was twenty years old again. You?"

"Sixteen." She bobbed her chin at the chutes where Dracula was slamming around working himself into a frenzy. "You ready for that monster?"

"Ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

"Vaya con Dios," she said quietly, and leaned up to kiss him on the cheek. That was followed by a few whistles and cheers from Bobo and the others as she strode over to the stands where she could watch him ride.

When the time came, Lee pulled his hat low and tight into his eyebrows, worked his gloved hand around and into the looped leather rope at the top of Dracula's huge neck, and eased himself down onto a body with hair so stiff and hard that it was like sitting on cacti. As usual, his body broke sweat and his mouth went dry as dust. He remembered the first thing he'd learned about bull riding: It wasn't a question of *whether* you'd get hurt, it was a question of how *bad.* Every bull you rode was a train wreck. Somewhere in the back of his mind was the thought: *Hazel was right. This is crazy—*

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But it was too late now. He jerked his chin in a curt nod. The chute was thrown open. Eternity began.

Lee's thighs contracted against the bull's bristly sides. Dracula leapt forward; Lee threw his chest forward to stay on. Dracula dug his front hooves in and stopped; Lee put his free hand forward on the great head to keep from going over the horns. Dracula bucked his flank up high and spun in a tight circle; Lee flung his free arm into the air to center himself. Dracula lifted all four hooves, bucking his body up a full five inches off the ground, then landed like an encyclopedia volume slamming flat to a wooden floor; Lee felt the jolt in his clavicle, sternum, rib cage, spleen, testicles, and rectum. All in three seconds—

Dracula suddenly spun to the left, stopped, then immediately jerked farther to the left, trying to throw Lee to the right. Lee hung on. Slathering foam from the bull's mouth flew back into Lee's face and burned his eyes. Dracula shifted, bucked, spun again, leapt into the air and dropped, just suddenly enough and high enough to spread Lee's legs out wide, thighs leaving the bull's coarse body. Then Dracula tried to run out from under him, or land Lee so far back on his flank that he would slide off—but Lee pulled himself forward and held on. Five seconds—

Dracula pitched, twisted, bucked, and rolled; Lee slid, shook, contorted; his neck jerked, teeth slammed together, eyeballs rotated; in his wrist, his carpal ligament stretched agonizingly; in his upper right arm the triceps burned as if they were actually on fire; both quadriceps began to swell in revolt. Seven seconds—

He couldn't last, he thought; he had to let go. His mind went into a frantic survival mode; he made a wild guess that Dracula was going to pitch to the right, so Lee decided to throw a leg over to the left and maybe get off upright, hopefully running, to get away from the beast when it turned and came after him. But just as he started bringing his right leg up and was about to throw himself to the left, Dracula pitched not right but left, and leaped, and Lee was back squarely on him, and then—

Eight seconds. The whistle blew. A roar erupted from the spectators. Dracula spun in a circle then, throwing Lee back and to the right, and Lee felt his body go free of the bull. Slamming into the ground, Lee rolled over just in time to see Dracula's evil face and deadly horns coming at him. Scrambling in the dirt, he got to his feet just as one horn gored through his Wranglers and lifted a four-inch slice out of his outside upper right thigh, missing his femur by a quarter-inch.

Then the arena men were there, rescuing him, half carrying, half dragging him to safety behind the chutes. Presently he was lying on a stretcher, Lupe kneeling beside him applying a tourniquet on the outside of his now blood-soaked Wranglers, tying it

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high up and tight near his hip to stanch the bleeding. The stretcher was lifted into a standby ambulance that left the rodeo grounds for the local hospital with siren screaming.

Lupe could not go with him; she had to remain at the arena to treat other injuries.

Hazel found Lee resting on an examination table in one of the curtained-off hospital emergency-room cubicles. His wound had been depurated, packed, stitched, and dressed. He was wearing a hospital gown, his bloody clothes in a bag on the floor.

"How are you?" she asked with what sounded like genuine concern.

"Looks like they'll have to amputate, Hazel."

"Cut the comedy," she snapped then. "Ed's back with a buyer and a suitcase of cash. They flew down in a private plane and landed on the flats outside of town. We need to do this deal tonight. How soon can you get out of here?"

Just as Hazel asked the question, Lupe came into the cubicle, followed by Chris and Bobo, who was carrying a stack of clean clothes for Lee. Lupe stared at Hazel for a moment, then handed Lee an envelope.

"My brother sent you your bull-riding prize money. He said to tell you not to worry about the hospital bill; our insurance company will pay it." Glancing at Hazel, she added, "Excuse the interruption." Then she turned and left.

"You okay?" Chris asked hastily.

"Yeah, fine."

Bobo put the clothes on a chair. "We rode over with her," he added, and the two hurried after Lupe.

"Was that your private little nurse?" Hazel asked snidely.

"Shut up and hand me those clothes," Lee said coldly. He sat up, managed to stand, and got dressed while balancing himself by the table. When he was ready, he said, "Okay, let's go."

Outside, it was dusk, a slight cooling breeze blowing over from Rio Grande City on the Texas side of the river. Lee got into the Caddy with Hazel. On the front floorboard was a small gardener's shovel wrapped in a newspaper. "Will that do?" Hazel asked.

"It'll do."

Hazel drove to uptown Ciudad Camargo and followed Calle Vista toward the playground. As they passed the Cafe Florian, Lee thought of Lupe and felt queasy. Lupe knew now that Lee had lied to her about Hazel being just a spectator that day, and he felt bad about it. He would try to explain, but he doubted she would listen. And he wouldn't blame her if she didn't. Sighing quietly, he told himself it was probably best that way, anyhow. Lupe was a good woman—and he himself wasn't exactly a catch.

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Hazel parked down a little ways from the playground and they walked back to it, Lee favoring his right leg. Hazel grimaced slightly at the sight of him limping, but said nothing. The playground was deserted; night was easing in and it was suppertime.

"Do you remember where you buried it?" Hazel asked nervously.

"No, I thought we'd dig up the whole playground," Lee said caustically. Hazel didn't pay any attention to his limp after that.

Everything about the playground was just as Lee remembered it—except that it looked a lot smaller. But the swings, the slides, the little plastic ponies, bunnies, piggies, all on coiled springs so they could bob back and forth, the monkey bars, tether ball, sandbox—all of it was the same as it was etched in Lee's mind, the same as he had thought about it during the days inside, dreamed about it in the nights, first at Rata Grande, then at Sweetwater. The playground and the diamonds. He had found the diamonds in his suitcase and foolishly decided to take a chance keeping them for himself. Bad move. Very bad.

But it was almost over—and at least he would get something, if not everything, out of it.

Lee went to the corner of the sandbox nearest the corner of the cyclone fence that ran along the back edge of the playground and both sides to keep the children from wandering. There was grass along the inside of the fence, and benches for young mothers to rest on. One of the benches was angled across the fence corner.

"Keep your eyes open," Lee said, stepping behind the bench. Unwrapping the small shovel, he began digging, easily, working the shovel at angles, lifting turf away first, then dirt, carefully, getting deeper only an inch or two at a time—until he felt the edge rub gently against something solid. Then he dug around it, cautiously, sawing the dirt along both sides, pushing the shovel under—and finally lifting out the dirt-covered tequila bottle.

Quickly Lee refilled the twelve-inch hole and worked the layer of grass back in place just as he had done five years earlier. Wrapping the shovel back in the newspaper, holding the bottle under one arm, he said, "Let's go."

He had Hazel stop at a self-service gas station where he made a show of cleaning the windshield, at the same time washing down the shovel and bottle, removing his prints, then dropping the shovel into a trash can and wrapping the bottle in paper towels.

Then Hazel drove them to a motel at the opposite end of town from where the rodeo crew was staying.

Waiting with Ed Fox in the motel room was a smallish Asian man neatly dressed in a suit and tie who looked as if he might be a bank teller or a shoe salesman. He was sitting at a table covered by a gray velvet cloth upon which lay a jeweler's loupe, a set of

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calipers, a small but expensive-looking chrome weighing scale, and an electronic calculator. Next to his feet rested an aluminum case with combination locks.

Looking up from the table, the Asian said to Fox in a precise voice, "Please explain the security precautions taken for this meeting."

"I've been photographed and fingerprinted," Fox said. "Anything goes wrong here, this man's employers will have me hunted down, tortured, and killed."

"Are we clear?" the little man asked.

Everyone assented.

The Asian held out a hand and Lee gave him the wrapped bottle. Removing the paper towels, he examined the tequila bottle and smiled approvingly at Lee. "Very clever. My compliments."

Uncapping the bottle, he slowly shook out a stream of uncut, unpolished diamonds. Even in their raw state, the stones looked impressive enough to cause Hazel to draw in her breath. Out they came from the neck of the bottle, in twos and threes, dropping onto a pile on the gray velvet that slowly grew to four inches in peaked height with a base the size of a saucer. Ed Fox tried mentally counting the number of stones, but lost track after a hundred.

Lee watched in awe as the Asian began meticulously examining each stone through the loupe, then setting it aside in one place or another on the velvet. Soon he had four separate smaller piles, some growing faster than others. "What's the difference in the piles?" Lee finally asked.

"Color," the Asian said. He pointed to each pile in turn. "These are colorless; they are the best. Next in value are blue diamonds. Then the more common ones, with a yellow tinge. And over here, the least valuable ones, with orange, green, or violet hues. After color separation, they must be divided into transparent, translucent, and opaque. Transparent is best; colorless and transparent are ideal."

After a while, Hazel went to lie on the bed. Lee and Fox both drew chairs up to the table. Didn't want the little slopehead pocketing any of the product.

The process took nearly two hours. After all the separating was done, both as to color and density, there was measuring—not all of the stones, just some—and the entering of figures on the calculator. It was after nine o'clock when the evaluation was finished.

"Eight hundred forty thousand market value," the Asian finally said. "Substantially less than the one-point-six-million insurance claim filed after the robbery. Because the stones are untraceable, I can offer you one-third: two hundred eighty thousand in clean money."

"We'd expected more," Hazel said.

"Life's expectations often fall short," the Asian replied philosophically. "Two-eighty. In cash. Right now."

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Ed Fox was indecisive. Lee knew he had no say in the matter. It was left up to Hazel.

"All right, damn it, let's get it over with," Hazel said, nettled.

The Asian worked two combinations and opened the aluminum case. Stacked neatly inside were rubber-banded sheaves of fifty- and hundred-dollar bills. The Asian quickly counted out four stacks of seventy thousand each. Hazel looked greedily at the considerable amount of cash left in the case.

"Don't even think about it, sweetie," Ed Fox said. "My ass is on the line here."

"Very true," the Asian confirmed. Lifting each corner of the velvet cloth, he mixed all the diamonds together again, twisted the cloth to form a bag, and put it into the case.

Hazel pushed one of the stacks of currency to Lee. "This is your share."

"That's not even a third, Hazel. That's only twenty-five percent," Lee complained.

"Look, we're all disappointed," Hazel snapped. "Ed and me, we expected to pull down three, three-fifty; we end up with two-ten. Be grateful you're getting as much as you are." Hazel glared at her ex-husband with such a hateful expression that Lee could not believe he had ever made love to her. "Take it or leave it," she said.

Ed Fox stepped over next to her, a pistol now visible in his waistband. "Better take it, Walsh," he said, his words a warning.

Lee took the stack of bills, divided them into four smaller stacks, and placed them securely inside his shirt. "Can you drive me back to my motel, Hazel? My leg—"

"For God's sake, Lee, don't be such a crybaby," Hazel replied impatiently. "Your leg's not that bad. You can walk."

"Right," Lee said.

He limped over to the door and left.

Lee did not even make it to the street before he became aware of someone close behind him and felt something hard against his spine.

"You know what this is, cowboy?" a raspy voice asked.

"Yeah."

"Step over here, nice and easy." When they were hidden in the shadows, at a point where they could still see the motel-room door, the voice asked, "Got any idea who I am?"

"I can guess."

"Okay, guess."

"The guy that got away."

"You win a cigar. Let's see what else you can win. Who all's left in there?"

"The fence. My ex-wife. Her ex-cop husband."

"Guns?"

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"I only saw one. The ex-cop."

"Has the deal gone down?"

"Yeah."

"How much?"

"Two-eighty." Starting to think, Lee quickly added, "But there's a lot more than that in there."

"How much more?"

Lee shrugged. "I'm not sure. Could be a couple hundred thousand more. Plus the diamonds."

"You get your end?"

"In a way. They gave me seventy."

"Nice people," the raspy voice opined. "You want to throw in with me and we'll take it all?"

"No offense, but I'd rather just walk away with what I've got," Lee said.

"You figure seventy is enough for the five years you done?"

"I'll settle for it if I can walk away."

A long moment of silence passed. Then the raspy voice said, "Okay. Stuff that money down in your boot tops and walk across the bridge to Rio Grande City. Catch a bus up to Laredo; there's an airport there. Just keep going. Deal?"

"Deal," said Lee.

Another moment of silence, then, "For what it's worth, I'm sorry for the time you done. I'd hoped you'd get away so I could get the diamonds back from you."

"Why'd you tip off Immigration, then?" Lee asked.

"I didn't tip off Immigration. What makes you think I did?"

"Somebody made an anonymous call."

"Wasn't me, cowboy."

Hazel, Lee thought. Probably paid some homeless guy to make the call. Must have looked in my suitcase again and found out I'd done something with the diamonds. Found the paper bag with one diamond I'd overlooked. Turned me in thinking I'd tell her where they were so she could get me out. Hazel, Hazel. Always scheming.

"We still got a deal?" Lee was asked.

"Yeah." Lee felt the pistol barrel taken away from his spine.

"Okay, cowboy. Hit the road."

Lee limped away. At the street, he glanced back and saw a shadowy figure moving toward the door of the motel room where the money and diamonds were. He hoped nothing really bad happened to Hazel, but if it did, well . . .

A few minutes later, Lee was crossing the bridge into Texas. Just another cowboy going home after an evening in a Mexican border town. No one paid any attention at all to him. He disappeared into the night.

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Lupe's journey back home was a long one.

She said goodbye to her brother and left the rodeo in Monterrey, as she had planned. A six A.M. flight got her into Mexico City three hours later. After a two-hour layover in the zoolike Benito Juarez International Airport, she boarded a smaller, older aircraft and after one stop in Veracruz, flew across the balmy Bay of Campeche to Mérida, arriving there late in the afternoon. There were no more scheduled bus departures from there to Yucatan's northern coast for the rest of the day, so she checked into a nearby motel. After a solitary dinner, she took a long walk around what was called the "White City" because of its scrupulous cleanliness. In the *zócalo,* the market square, she browsed and bought a *huipil,* the traditional straight white Mayan dress worn locally, this one with ochre embroidery at the neck and hem. It would please her grandfather to see her in that kind of dress, because her grandmother had always worn one. And her grandfather had Mayan bloodlines that he could trace back to the House of Montejo in the mid sixteenth century.

The next morning, forgoing breakfast, dressed in her new *huipil,* she boarded an unsteady old bus for the hundred-mile trip to Tizimin. In that village, she had another two-hour layover, so she ate a light lunch washed down with green local beer. Then she boarded an even shakier bus for a precarious fifty-mile trip north. The beer helped her to doze between potholes in the road, and in midafternoon she got off in Rio Lagartos. There she found a local taxi to take her the remaining eight miles to San Filipe.

Arriving back in the village of her youth, Lupe was flooded with memories both joyful and melancholy. So much of what she had become was rooted there in that village; it had given her so much—and now she was going to give herself back as the nurse she had become.

Carrying her bag, she made her way up the cobblestone path that led to her grandfather's house. When she came within sight of it, she saw her grandfather, old but not fragile, coconut-brown, slightly more stooped than she remembered, long white hair braided in the back. He was sitting at his stonecutter's table in the yard, mallet and chisel in his hands, meticulously forming red tiles from a slab of metamorphic sandstone.

At that point, Lupe stopped abruptly, set her bag down, and stared at the house. On one side of it, a ladder leaned in place. Half of the roof was covered with new red tiles. As Lupe stared, she saw Lee, in work clothes, come down the ladder and go around to her grandfather.

Both men noticed her then. Her grandfather smiled at the sight of her in the new *huipil,* and nodded approvingly.

Blinking back tears, Lupe picked up her bag as Lee walked out to meet her. ●

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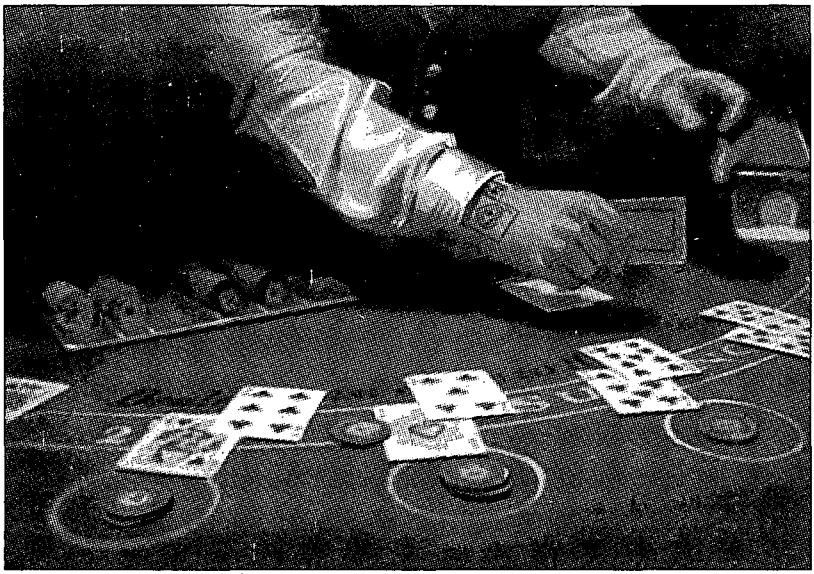

Art by Mark Evans

TRAM TO TOMORROW

by Edward D. Hoch

Simon Ark and I had just settled down on the plush sofa in the presidential suite of the Gladiator Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas when Oscar Hartman came directly to the point. "A day of my life has disappeared, Mr. Ark. I want to know what happened to it."

Hartman had written a book on sports betting for us when I was still an editor at Neptune Books, but I'd had no contact with him for years. His desperate phone call the previous day had been enough to bring Simon and me to Vegas on an early flight. He had always been a big man, tall and broad-shouldered, but now he seemed somehow deflated. "You'd better tell us exactly what happened," Simon said, anxious to hear the details of the man's bizarre story.

Before he began, Hartman moved to the bar at one end of the room and poured us some wine. Reseated in the armchair that faced our sofa, he began. "I've been active in sports betting for the past twenty years, well before Neptune published my book on the subject. I'm especially interested in high-stakes boxing matches

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where a great deal of money can change hands. In fact, my friends and I have formed a small betting syndicate. I never gamble in Vegas except on sporting events. That's where the big money is."

"Exactly how does such an operation function?" Simon wanted to know.

"There are four of us in four different cities. Each of us puts up a quarter of the total wager and lays it off with sports books in our cities. Monday night's light-heavyweight championship was a perfect fight for our purpose. It was held here in Vegas at the Tomorrow Hotel and Casino right across the street. Pedro Cortez and Harley Jones are two tough fighters, both undefeated. The fight could have gone either way, but the big money seemed to be on Jones. That was one reason our syndicate decided to back Cortez, because the odds were better. We would bet two hundred thousand dollars, with each of us putting up fifty thousand. The bets would be placed in Vegas, Reno, Chicago, and Los Angeles, so they'd affect the odds as little as possible."

"Who are the other syndicate members?" I asked.

"Their names are unimportant at the moment. I can reveal them later if that becomes necessary." He took a sip of wine and continued. "The plan was for me to deliver my fifty-thousand-dollar cashier's check to the sports book at Tomorrow on Monday evening, about three hours before the fight. The others would do likewise in their cities. But early that afternoon something went wrong. The Chicago establishment was shut down after a police raid, and L.A. quickly closed, fearing they were next. Of course, sports betting is legal in Nevada, so Reno and Vegas stayed open, but we had a problem. Everyone agreed that Chicago and L.A. would be back in business in a matter of days, but that didn't help us at the moment. The fight was Monday night. We had a conference call and decided I should bet the entire two hundred grand here at Tomorrow since that's where the fight was. Maybe it wouldn't affect the odds too much. My three partners sent their money to my bank by wire transfer and before the bank closed at five I had a cashier's check for the whole two hundred grand. With odds at five to one we were looking at a million dollars if Cortez won."

TV has proved the most compatible performance medium for one of the very few remaining career short-story writers, Edward D. Hoch. A number of his published stories, which total around 900, formed the basis for TV episodes on popular series such as *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* and *Night Gallery,* and plots from two of his tales were borrowed for *McMillan and Wife.* European TV's featured him, too: Multiple programs based on his stories have aired in France and Germany. ¶

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"Someone stole the check," I guessed.

"On the contrary, I still have it. The Gladiator and Tomorrow are both owned by Sonny Charles, with a tram crossing a bridge over the Strip to connect them. You probably saw it when you arrived. I left the bank before five and returned here, where I immediately took the tram over to Tomorrow and went down to their sports book with my check. I said I wanted to bet two hundred thousand on Cortez and the clerk just laughed. He told me I was a day late. The fight was last night and Cortez did indeed win, by a knockout in the seventh round."

"You'd gotten the night wrong?" Simon Ark asked.

"No, it was a Monday bout, all right, but he told me this was Tuesday. I said he was crazy. I demanded to see the manager. They showed me the Tuesday paper with an article on the fight. They showed me the time and date on their computers and on the big wall clock over the TV screens. I checked my own watch and they were right. It was just after five P.M. on Tuesday, October twenty-first. Somehow I'd lost an entire day and missed the big fight."

"And yesterday morning you called me," I said.

"I knew of your friendship with Mr. Ark here, and I knew he often investigates supernatural occurrences. If this isn't supernatural, I don't know what it is."

Simon shifted uneasily on the sofa. It was the usual sunny Vegas afternoon and his black suit and gray countenance made him seem distinctly out of place. "Perhaps you merely dozed off without realizing it," he suggested.

"For twenty-four hours? That's impossible."

"Have you reported it to the police?"

"How could I? No crime has been committed. The cashier's check is still in my pocket." He took it out and handed it to Simon. The check was indeed dated October 20, the day of the fight.

"Between the time you picked up the check and arrived at the Tomorrow sports book, did you encounter anyone you knew?"

"Not really. I didn't speak to anyone."

"Tell me about the tram ride. Were there other passengers?"

"Sure. All tourists, I suppose. A hotel employee was loading the cars and he directed me into the second car with eight or ten others. It's only a two-minute ride across to the Tomorrow casino." Simon fell silent, deep in thought, and after a moment Oscar Hartman asked, "Can you help me?"

"I don't know. I want you to retrace the route you took Monday evening while we accompany you."

"Very well," he said, getting to his feet. "This is a very important matter for me, and for my partners in the syndicate. Even though no crime seems to have been committed, we were robbed of the

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opportunity of placing our bet. In a sense we were robbed of a million dollars."

Simon merely smiled at that. "I doubt if the police would make an arrest even if you could prove you were transported to another dimension."

As we headed down in the elevator I asked Hartman if he'd contacted the casino's owner, Sonny Charles. "You bet I did!" he told us. "I went right to the top, for all the good it did me. He acted like I was passing into early senility or something."

We left the elevator on the mezzanine floor and he showed us where he'd come up from the street and immediately boarded the tram. "It was easier than walking up to the corner and crossing the Strip at the light."

There were only a few people waiting among the gladiator statues that were the casino's trademark. Within minutes the two-car tram arrived, disgorging a few young families with children in tow. There was no one to steer us into the proper car, so we chose the second one where Hartman had traveled, perhaps to another dimension. The tram cars were green, with metal seats along the sides and straps for standees, much like New York subway cars, only smaller, less than half the size. "Was there anyone you recognized here?" Simon asked.

"No."

"Think hard. Whom were you seated next to?"

"It wasn't too crowded. There was no one on my right, and on my left was a young dark-haired woman, I think. And there was an obvious tourist with an orange cap standing in front of me. I didn't pay much attention."

The tram deposited us across the Las Vegas Strip at the Tomorrow Casino, where shiny metallic robots lifting their arms to greet us replaced the statues of fierce-looking gladiators. Instead of escalators here there were gently sloping moving ramps, easier to navigate for patrons in wheelchairs. The sports book was an elaborate area near the back of the main floor where several rows of padded armchairs faced a bank of TV screens showing sporting events around the country. Because of the time difference, the horse races were obviously replays, but there was also a golf tournament under way. A large center screen showed the fifth game of the World Series in progress. Sheets with betting odds were displayed on spindles near each screen.

"I went up to the window there and presented my check. That's when the roof fell in," Hartman said.

"The time and date are shown about the TV monitors," I pointed out.

"I paid no attention to that until later. I was so sure it was Monday evening. . . ." His face had taken on a look of despair.

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I felt sorry for the man, but there seemed no possible explanation save a temporary memory loss. Perhaps he'd suffered a slight stroke. In any event I was sure he needed a doctor's examination more than Simon Ark's deductions. But Simon himself had shifted his gaze away from the TV wall of the sports book and was focused on a banner announcing *Rhonda Flagg—Magic for the New Century! Nightly at Tomorrow!* The photo showed a striking young woman with blond hair long enough to hide a couple of rabbits. Her costume revealed bare arms with the tattoo of a question mark near her left shoulder.

Oscar Hartman had followed Simon's gaze and suddenly spoke. "I just remembered something. The woman who sat next to me on the tram—she had a small tattoo just above her right wrist. It looked like two playing cards, an ace of hearts over a king of spades."

"Could it have been Rhonda Flagg?" Simon asked.

He shook his head. "I know Rhonda. This woman had dark hair, not blond."

"Rhonda might wear a wig for her act," I suggested.

"It wasn't her."

But for some reason Simon had settled on the lady magician. "When there's magic, one looks for a magician," he said logically. "I believe we're in time for the evening performance, if they have a table free."

Rhonda Flagg was tall and glib, with an easy patter that made the performance more notable than the magic. She really did pull a rabbit out of all that hair, and then vanished him in a trick box that must have been old in Houdini's time. She soon graduated to larger animals, working up to a goat that vanished in an awkwardly mirrored box. There was a floating light bulb and some standard business with linking rings, but nothing that prepared me for Simon's request that we visit the lady in her dressing room.

Perhaps the women who work Vegas are in the habit of receiving older men in their dressing rooms, though none so old as Simon Ark. She greeted us with a fair amount of grace, especially when I announced my publishing connection. The blond hair was indeed a wig, and when I remarked on this she answered with a grin, "You didn't think I'd have a hare in my hair, did you?" I wondered how often she'd used that line.

"Your act was most impressive, as always, Rhonda," Oscar Hartman told her. "We may be back tomorrow night."

"Don't bother," she told him with a smile. "You've seen it so often you must know it's always the same."

I could see there were no tattoos on either of her wrists, but that

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wasn't what interested Simon. "Tell me, Miss Flagg, have you ever used hypnosis in your act?"

"Never. That's too tricky for me. Crazy things happen sometimes, unless it's a fake."

"Are there any hypnotists in the city at the moment?"

"Not a one that I know of right now. We have a few other magicians, of course, but no one who uses hypnotism."

Hartman invited her out to dinner, and she readily accepted. Simon and I left the two of them heading for the Tomorrow dining room. "Maybe that will take his mind off the lost day," I suggested to Simon. "They seem to be old friends. But what about us?"

His answer took me by surprise. "As long as we're here, perhaps we should play some blackjack."

I'd never seen Simon Ark gamble before, and I could sense his distaste for it. He inspected each blackjack table before finally choosing one that had an attractive red-haired woman as dealer. The table minimum was twenty-five dollars. He played one losing hand, pocketed his remaining chips, and left.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

"Searching, my friend. Always searching."

"Do you expect to find the devil in this casino?"

"Some say the devil is in the details. Remember the tattoo on that girl's wrist?"

"The one Hartman sat next to on the tram? But Rhonda Flagg only had a question mark on her shoulder."

"What does a tattoo of an ace and a king on a woman's wrist suggest to you, here in Las Vegas? That the woman most likely is, or was, a blackjack dealer."

"Maybe," I admitted with some reluctance.

"I played that hand because the redhead's was the only right wrist I couldn't see clearly from a distance. But when she dealt the cards to me, I saw there was no tattoo."

"Even if your theory's right, she might be off duty. So what do we do now?"

"Go back to the Gladiator Casino. She may be on duty there."

I sighed and followed along. "But no crime's been committed. No one's been harmed. What are we searching for?"

"Another dimension."

We rode the tram back across the Strip to the Gladiator, from the future to the past in under two minutes. Ahead of us, a man pushed his wife in a wheelchair. We followed down one of the moving ramps to the main casino floor where Simon once more headed for the blackjack tables.

That was when a bulky man in a blue suit who could only have been a security guard suddenly interrupted our journey. "Pardon

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me, gentlemen, but Mr. Charles would like to speak with you."

"I don't know any Charles," I told him.

"Mr. Sonny Charles. You're in his casino. It will only take a few minutes of your time."

"We would like to meet him," Simon said before I could put up further resistance.

The security man led us to an office on the mezzanine, no doubt adjacent to the video screens and two-way mirrors used to watch over the gaming floor. Sonny Charles, obviously expecting us, rose to shake our hands. He was deeply tanned and probably in his late fifties, with gray sideburns stretching almost to his chin. "Thank you for stopping by," he said, as if we'd had much of a choice. He motioned us to chairs facing a desk about the size of a pool table. "You are Simon Ark?"

Simon acknowledged the fact. "You have a very efficient operation here."

Sonny Charles shook his head, acting puzzled. "I understand that you investigate strange happenings and psychic phenomena. What could you possibly find of interest here?"

Simon smiled slightly. "I could say my friend and I are merely on holiday, but that is hardly the truth. A customer of yours, a man named Oscar Hartman, tells a curious story. It appears he was transported to another dimension while traveling between your casinos on the tram. He lost a full day and was unable to place a wager on the Cortez-Jones fight last Monday night."

"I've spoken with him," Charles admitted. "His story is hardly one that concerns me. For the life of me I can't imagine what he wants. Am I supposed to pay his winnings on a bet he never made?"

"The world is a strange place, and even such an oasis of modernism as Las Vegas can be touched by the unknown at times."

"Not in my casinos. They run like clockwork. Nothing happens that I don't know about."

"Oh, I don't doubt that," Simon agreed. "I feel certain you know exactly what happened to Oscar Hartman."

"Am I going to have trouble with you, Mr. Ark?"

"Not at all. I intend to conclude my investigation and then move on."

He sighed and shook his head again. "How much is Hartman paying you?"

"There is no money involved in my activities," Simon assured him. "I am employed by a higher power."

"The government?"

I had to interrupt here. "We'll be gone shortly," I assured Sonny Charles.

He turned his attention to me. "I hope so. There is nothing here

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to be uncovered."

Simon Ark got to his feet. "It was a pleasure meeting you, sir."

Charles stood up too. "Where are you going now?"

"I thought I might play a little more blackjack."

The tables were crowded now that it was past the dinner hour and the shows were out. Simon bypassed several of them but paused at last before one where a dark-haired young woman was dealing cards across the green felt top almost faster than the eye could follow. She had an oval gold nameplate pinned to her blouse, announcing that her name was Matty. When one man gave up in disgust, Simon slid into his chair and produced the remaining chips from his pocket. I stood back and watched, wondering if somewhere above us other eyes were watching, too. Simon played two hands this time, winning on both, and then gave up his seat.

"She has the tattoo," he told me.

"There might be more than one."

"We'll start with her."

We watched from a distance for the better part of an hour before a male dealer relieved her. We intercepted her as she removed her nametag and walked toward the restrooms. "Pardon me, miss," Simon called to her. "Might we have a word with you?"

She recognized his black suit at once. It was hardly your typical Vegas costume. "You were at my table earlier."

He nodded. "I was looking for a blackjack dealer with tattooed cards on her wrist. An ace and a king."

"That's me," she agreed. "I'm Matty Symons. Do I get a prize?"

"On Monday evening you rode the tram to the Tomorrow Casino seated next to a man named Oscar Hartman."

"Did I?"

"I want to know what happened."

"Nothing happened that I remember."

"Why were you going over there when you work here?"

She shrugged. "I go where they tell me."

"Who told you to get on that tram and sit next to Hartman? It could be worth money to you."

"Look, I'm on my break." She glanced around. "I can't talk now."

"What time do you finish?" He had her hooked and wouldn't let go.

"Midnight, sometimes earlier."

"Suppose we meet then in that Night Owl Coffee Shop over there."

"All right," she said. "Maybe. I can't promise."

Simon gave her the chips he'd won at her table. "There's more if you can help us."

"I'll see."

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She hurried on into the restroom and I decided I was getting hungry. "Let's get something to eat while we wait," I suggested.

We went down the block to the Luxor and had a late dinner there. It was shortly after eleven when we headed back up toward the Gladiator and Tomorrow. The traffic seemed at a complete standstill along the Strip and I could see the flashing lights of emergency vehicles up ahead.

"What's the trouble?" I asked a man as we reached the edge of the crowd.

"Woman fell from the tram bridge. I heard her scream. She landed right in the middle of the traffic."

We worked our way through the gapers until we could see the body mostly covered by a tarp. Her right wrist was visible and it had a tattoo of two playing cards. "Now there's been a crime," I said to Simon.

"There was always a crime. That's why they killed her."

We saw it on the morning TV news. Mariam Symons, a blackjack dealer at the Gladiator, had died in a fall from the tram bridge. Simon and I watched the screen in my hotel room, and finally I put words to what we were both thinking. "They killed her because they saw us talking to her."

"Probably," he admitted. "If Sonny Charles is involved, he would have had TV monitors on us the whole time."

"We'd better phone Hartman's room and tell him."

I punched in his suite number on the phone and heard his groggy voice on the other end. "Hartman."

I identified myself and hurried on to the bad news. "Turn on your TV news." He did so—I heard it come on in the background. After a moment I said, "That woman who was killed last night on the Strip—she's the one who sat next to you on the tram the other night."

There was a sharp intake of breath. "I'm watching it right now. Are you certain?"

"We are. Simon spoke to her earlier and we were to meet her again at the end of her shift."

"My God, poor Matty!" The TV sound went off and he said, "Could you and Ark come up to my suite? One of my business partners arrived in town late last night. He's having breakfast here at eight."

"We'll be up."

When we arrived, the waiter was just serving breakfast. The man with Hartman was named Pete Gallagher. "From Reno," he added, by way of explanation. He was a short, balding man wearing dark-rimmed glasses that somehow gave him a studious appearance. "When I heard what happened with our wager I

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decided to drive down here and see about it."

Hartman was only partly dressed, wearing pants and shirt, with feet bare. His wallet, wrist watch, and a few poker chips were on the nightstand next to his bed. "I told him his money was completely safe," Hartman explained, "that I'd hired one of the best detectives—"

"I am not a detective," Simon corrected. "I investigate phenomena, not facts."

Pete Gallagher reached out for a glass of orange juice on the table next to him. "Oscar told me what happened, or rather what didn't happen. He didn't get our bet down on the fight Monday night, and that lost us a million-dollar payday."

"We're looking into the matter," I told him.

The short man was obviously unhappy. "That may not be good enough."

"What about this woman who was killed?" Hartman asked. "What happened to her?"

"Apparently there's an emergency walkway on the bridge next to the tram tracks. She may have jumped from it, or been pushed."

"Was she involved in what happened to me?"

"Almost certainly," Simon told him. "If you'll just sit back and relax I'll tell you what I think happened. Your story was so far-fetched I felt it had to be true—or at least true from your viewpoint. My only uncertainty was the nature of your experience. You picked up the cashier's check at the bank and returned to this hotel where you immediately took the tram to the sports book at the Tomorrow. That was where you learned you'd lost a day. Any sort of seizure or collapse in the street or hotel would have been seen and you'd have received prompt medical attention. On the tram you were seated and might have dozed off. I became convinced that whatever happened to you happened on that tram. Thus only two possibilities presented themselves. Either the event was paranormal or criminal. Either you were transported to another dimension or you were somehow drugged and kidnapped."

"I'd as soon believe one as the other," Hartman said.

"Well, let's examine the paranormal for a moment. You are taken off that tram on Monday and plunged into another dimension, about which you remember nothing. Twenty-four hours later you return to the same seat in the same tram car."

"Maybe that's what happened."

"No, it isn't. You described your fellow passengers on the tram—the tourist with the orange cap, the young woman next to you with the tattooed wrist. These people got on with you and they got off with you. If there was any sort of supernatural humbug, you'd have ended up on that tram with different people, Tuesday's passengers instead of Monday's."

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"But suppose I was drugged and kidnapped for twenty-four hours and then returned to the tram. There'd still have been different people on it."

"Not if they were all part of the plot," Simon Ark said.

"All?"

"You said there were eight or ten people on your tram car, and that a hotel employee steered you into the second car. Yet there was no one loading passengers when we retraced your route. I believe you were purposely loaded onto that car, Mr. Hartman, along with several hotel employees who could be trusted to keep their mouths shut. One of them near you, either the man with the orange cap or Matty Symons, injected you with a fast-acting anesthetic, Versed or something similar."

"How did they get me off the tram?"

"Probably in a wheelchair. You see them frequently in the casinos. You were taken to a private room and kept sedated for twenty-four hours. Then they brought you back onto the tram in a wheelchair, sat you in the same seat surrounded by the same people, and gave you a shot of something else to clear your mind. You never realized it was the next day until you went to place your bet."

"Why?" Pete Gallagher wanted to know. "Las Vegas sports books are in the business to make money. Why would they construct an elaborate plot like this whose only purpose was to keep us from betting two hundred thousand dollars on the fight?"

It was a good question and I doubted that even Simon Ark could answer it. The scheme he'd outlined, involving several hotel employees, could only have been carried out with the knowledge and approval of Sonny Charles. But toward what goal?

Simon pondered Gallagher's question and asked one of his own. "Who knew you were going to place that wager?"

"Only the four members of our syndicate," Hartman replied.

"I need their names."

"Myself, Gallagher here, Lloyd Broughton in Chicago, and Tommy Zane in L.A. What difference does that make?"

"In order for Sonny Charles to concoct this scheme, if he's the one who did it, he had to have prior knowledge that you would be placing the bet. One of you four must have told him."

"Impossible!" Gallagher insisted.

Oscar Hartman agreed. "None of us has a very high opinion of Sonny Charles. Not one of us would have mentioned the bet to him. There's no reason why we had to. Bets this big are not unusual for a major prizefight in Vegas."

"You mentioned a conference call about the money. Could Charles have a tap on your phone here?"

Hartman shook his head. "I don't take chances like that. Every

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time we talked I used my cell phone. I know their signals can be intercepted too, but not as easily as with a phone tap."

"Where does that leave us?" Gallagher asked.

Simon's face betrayed no emotion, but then it rarely did. I'd known him long enough to feel his frustration. He'd come up with a possible solution to Hartman's missing day, and the very fact of Matty Symons's death seemed to support it, but for Sonny Charles to be involved there had to be a motive. A motive and a way in which he learned of Hartman's intentions.

"Give me until tonight," Simon told the two men. "But answer me one question first. What would have been the result if you had arrived at the Tomorrow in time to place that two-hundred-thousand-dollar bet on Cortez?"

Gallagher thought about it. "Well, the odds on the fight might have changed. That's why we originally planned to lay off the wagers in various cities. But would that have caused him to come up with such an elaborate scheme? He could have paid someone to mug Oscar as he left the bank with the check. It would have been a lot easier if Charles was that concerned with the odds."

"No," Simon pointed out. "Because the bank would have replaced the check if its customer was robbed. The way it played out, Mr. Hartman here was prevented from betting in a manner that went unreported until well after the fight, and even then seemed so fantastic that no crime was immediately discernible."

"What do you suggest we do?" Gallagher asked.

"I'll request another meeting with Sonny Charles this morning. The death of that young woman may have scared him enough that he'll be willing to tell all."

"Unless," I suggested, "he's the one responsible for her death."

Friday morning was much the same as other mid-October days in Las Vegas, with temperatures approaching ninety under a cloudless sky. Simon and I had breakfast downstairs and I made the call requesting a morning meeting with Sonny Charles. His secretary informed me that he never arrived in the office before eleven o'clock and his schedule for the day was full.

As Simon had instructed me, I told her it was about the Cortez-Jones fight and it was extremely important. She suggested I call back after eleven. I conveyed this news to Simon and he seemed unconcerned. "He'll see us, my friend. Be assured of that. If he refuses, it will mean my theory is incorrect."

We met with Hartman and Gallagher later that morning and they were with us when I called the head office shortly after eleven. When I identified myself, the secretary hesitated and then said, "Mr. Charles needs to know what this is about."

"I told you. It's about the Monday-night fight." I glanced at

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Simon and added, "And the death of one of your blackjack dealers last night."

She put me on hold for a moment and then came back. "Mr. Charles has fifteen minutes free at noon, if you could come up then."

"We'll be there."

It was obvious at once that this meeting was to be far different from the one we'd attended the previous day. On Thursday, we'd been virtually ordered to his office. Today we were invading it. Simon had suggested that Gallagher stay away, but Oscar Hartman was with us again. Charles tried to brazen it out, saying that nothing new had happened since the previous day, but Simon reminded him that Matty Symons was dead now.

"Symons? You mean the blackjack dealer here at the Gladiator? That was a tragic accident. What about her?"

"She played a part in the drugging and kidnapping of Mr. Hartman here, a crime that could not have been carried out without your knowledge and complicity."

"Drugging? Kidnapping? Are you insane, man?"

"If Mr. Hartman had placed his two-hundred-thousand-dollar wager with your sports book at the Tomorrow, the odds on Pedro Cortez would have suffered a noticeable drop just hours before the fight."

"What difference would that have made to me?" Sonny Charles asked with a dismissive shrug.

"A big difference, if you were planning a late bet on Cortez yourself—"

"Oh?"

"—and if the fight was fixed."

His face reddened a bit at Simon's words. "Are you making an accusation?"

"Not at all. Only a speculation. Of course, if you made no late bet, this is only idle conversation."

"You can't prove any of this, and I could sue you for slander if you repeated these charges outside this office."

"Oh, I think the part about Mr. Hartman would be easy enough to prove." He quickly went over his explanation for the missing day. "There had to be several of your employees involved. I'm sure some of them will be ready to talk after what happened to Matty Symons."

"I had nothing to do with that unfortunate accident."

"But I don't believe you would want the police investigating it too closely, linking it with Mr. Hartman's story and the betting on Monday night's fight."

Charles seemed to be seething inside, but somehow he managed to hold his temper. "You're an old devil, Mr. Ark."

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"Old, but no devil."

He sighed and turned to Hartman. "How much do you want to make this go away?"

Before Hartman could answer, Simon replied for him. "Two hundred thousand dollars, the amount he wanted to bet. That's only even money on the fight, so it's not unreasonable."

Sonny Charles thought about it for just a moment. "Very well, if you will sign a paper surrendering any other claims on me and promising to keep this entire affair confidential."

Oscar Hartman moistened his lips, not quite containing his emotions. "I have three partners. I would like four checks in the amount of fifty thousand each, made out to cash."

"Very well, but I'll need names. With winnings this large, the IRS must be notified. Don't worry, I'll handle the paperwork."

"Tell me one thing, Charles. How did you know in advance that I was planning to place that bet?"

The casino owner merely smiled. "It was magic."

Back in Hartman's suite, he told Pete Gallagher the news. "The checks will be ready by three o'clock, Pete. Why don't you get on the phone and tell Zane and Broughton the good news?"

"Let's wait till the money's in hand. I don't trust Sonny Charles any further than I can see him, especially after what happened to his blackjack dealer."

"You may be right," Hartman agreed reluctantly. Turning to us, he asked, "Can you two stay around until we're safely out of here with the checks?"

"Of course," Simon agreed at once.

Hartman produced his bottle of wine, but both of us declined. Pete Gallagher went down to the lobby to do some gambling while we waited. Hartman took a sip of wine and muttered, "I still don't know how he got wind of our bet."

"Maybe someone at the bank phoned him."

But Simon vetoed that theory. "He wouldn't have had time to assemble his people. Remember, everyone on that tram car had to be working for him."

"Charles said it was magic," I pointed out. "Maybe it was."

Simon raised his eyebrows at my words. "Of course," he said suddenly. "The oldest sort of magic in the world. The sort that doomed Adam in the Garden of Eden. We keep forgetting that just as Matty Symons was a Charles employee, so was Rhonda Flagg, the lady magician."

Hartman started to protest. "I don't—"

"You told us you knew her before, and you went off to dinner with her last evening. That wasn't the first time, was it? Charles himself said it was magic that he knew in advance about your bet.

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You let something slip to Rhonda Flagg and she reported it to her boss."

He drew a deep breath and said finally, "I might have. I never thought—"

Simon Ark placed a hand on his shoulder. "Perhaps this is the moment for a full confession, Mr. Hartman."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you kill Matty Symons?"

Sometimes Simon's investigations end with a bang, but this time it was more like a whimper. Oscar Hartman stared up at him through bloodshot eyes and whispered, "It was an accident."

"Tell me about it."

"I thought I recognized her at one of the blackjack tables. I played a few hands until I saw the tattoo and then I was sure. When she came off duty I followed her up to the tram. I tried to grab her but she ran away, along the tram tracks. I caught her about halfway across the bridge and we struggled. I pushed her, and she went over the guardrail. God, I didn't mean to do it!"

"I think you should tell the police exactly what happened."

"I can't! I'd have to tell them about Sonny Charles and the kidnapping and all that. He's paying us the money to keep quiet about it."

"Sometimes there are things that can't be kept quiet."

"Try telling that to my partners!" He stared out the window at the flashing lights of the casino across the street. Then he asked, "How did you know?"

"You told us you never gambled on the casino games, but when we came up here this morning I noticed the chips on the table by your wallet. You also referred to her as 'Poor Matty' after you'd seen the TV report, but they identified her as Mariam Symons. To call her Matty, you must have seen the nameplate on her jacket."

"I might have remembered that from the tram."

"No, because I noticed last night that she removed her nametag when she left the blackjack table. You saw her dealing and played some hands with her. Since you didn't mention it earlier, I had to suspect you might have had a hand in her death."

There was a knock on the door and Pete Gallagher returned with a tale of losing three thousand dollars in ten minutes at the roulette table. "Are the checks here yet?" he asked.

"Not yet," Simon told him when Hartman didn't answer. "I think we should leave you two alone to talk. I have done everything I can for you."

We took the elevator down to our rooms. "How would you bet?" I asked. "That he'll call the police or keep the checks?"

Simon Ark merely smiled. "I'm not a betting man, especially in Las Vegas." ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

THE RED MERCEDES

by Theo Capel

Translated from the Dutch by Josh Pachter

From where I stood, I had a clear view of the red Mercedes E240. It was bathed in afternoon sun, which made it seem even redder. If you gashed your hand and watched it bleed, you'd see the exact same shade.

So the car *did* exist, after all, which meant we had a chance to get it back. Klop's uneasiness had been misplaced.

Klop runs the Personal Loans department of the Geldkrediet Bank. His job is, on the one hand, to lend out as much money as possible, then, on the other hand, to get it all back with interest. It doesn't always work out the way it's supposed to, and that's where I come in. My one-man firm is called Stammer's Collections, but Klop and I know each other from way back and are on a friendly basis.

That morning he'd sounded more nervous than usual, and the fact that he was waiting for me when I presented myself at the reception desk was a clear sign that something out of the ordinary was up.

"Seen the paper, Hank?" he said as we walked down the Geldkrediet Bank's cool corridors towards his office. "The accident in the Keizersgracht?"

Born in Amsterdam in 1944, Theo Capel is a child psychologist who began reviewing crime fiction in the mid '70s, and penned his first novel in 1981. The book became a series whose 10th entry appeared in 2002. "The Red Mercedes" is the author's first work to be translated into English. He has, to date, one credit in the performing arts, a story dramatized on Dutch radio. His translator, Josh Pachter, also an *EQMM* fiction writer, has had two stories optioned for film and one adapted for Belgian radio.

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I shook my head. Klop and I read different newspapers.

"Guy's lived his whole life in Amsterdam, run over on his doorstep by a French tourist. Must have had too much wine at dinner, the Frenchman. And then, while the guy's lying there in the gutter waiting for the ambulance, he's robbed by a German drug addict. What a world, Hank. What's it all coming to?"

In my newspaper, they're called "junkies," not "drug addicts." Maybe that sounds more interesting. I didn't answer Klop's question—his paper'd already done that for him. The world was going to hell, you could read all about it every day.

We walked on in silence, with me still wondering what was up. The answer came at Klop's office door.

"You hear about Schepers, Hank?"

"Schepers? No, what's the old man done now?"

"He's dead. Heart attack."

This *was* news. I'd known Schepers during my own time at the Geldkrediet Bank. He was an old-school manager, totally authoritarian. His fight against women in pants had made him notorious.

"But, Mr. Schepers, pants cover up more of my figure than a skirt," one courageous secretary had dared to argue.

"Madam, pants accentuate, a skirt conceals," was his honeyed response. Since that day, those words had been used around the bank to put an end to uncomfortable conversations.

"It was a disaster," Klop said. "You see, it happened in a—in a club."

"A club?"

He gave me a pained look. "You know what I mean," he said.

The penny dropped. "A sex club? Schepers? Really?"

He winced. "You don't have to say it out loud, Hank. The walls have ears. Let's just call it a 'club,' okay?"

That was fine with me, but I knew there had to be more to the story. Klop might be a latter-day Puritan, but he didn't really care what other people did with their private lives, as long as they didn't scare the horses. Work, that's all he was really interested in.

He ushered me into his office and sent his secretary off for coffee.

I sat there quietly, waiting for the rest of it. It took Klop several moments to work his tight mouth around the words.

"He left a hell of a mess behind, Hank. He broke more rules than I can count, and it looks like he knew exactly what he was doing. I'm afraid the bank stands to lose a bundle."

His face reddened. Klop was convinced that his customers were always trying to rip the bank off. But he couldn't bring himself to believe that his colleagues were capable of the same bad behavior.

"So far, we've been able to keep it quiet. Only Internal Affairs

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knows anything about it. We're talking about a hundred thousand, here. Euros, Hank. A hundred thousand euros."

Klop hadn't really adjusted to the euro yet. He still thought in guilders. Personal loans were generally in the 5,000–10,000 euro range. It would be the end of Klop's world if twenty such loans suddenly went up in smoke.

"Is the money gone, Klop? What did he do with it?"

Given the scene of Schepers' death, there was an obvious answer to my question, but even for that sort of situation, it was an awful lot of money.

"You knew Schepers was in charge of Auto Loans?"

I hadn't known.

"Well, for starters, he seems to have approved two car loans which ought to have been denied. He took care of all the paperwork himself, didn't go through the ordinary channels. Then he made it look like the payments were coming in on time—but actually it turns out that the man who got the vehicles never paid a cent on the loans."

"How did he manage that? If no payments were being made, it would've shown up in Accounting, wouldn't it?"

Klop shook his head sadly. "He made the payments himself. Well, not really. He made it *look* like the payments were coming in, juggled the books, sort of a robbing-Peter-to-pay-Paul situation. And because he's been here so long, and knows our systems, he was able to cover it up."

"Until he died."

"Well, yes. When he stopped faking the payments, the loans were red-flagged and investigated, and that's when the truth came to light. Now we need to repossess the cars. You think you can handle that?"

"We'll see," I said. "But why did he do it? What did he get out of it? And why *two* cars?"

Klop scowled. "That's where the story turns really nasty. Schepers was speculating on the dollar market—apparently with embezzled funds. He bought an option for three months, the dollar fell against the euro, and he lost it all. Naturally, he was hoping to make a big enough profit to pay everything back."

For a man in Schepers' position, it would have been easy to place a large dollar order with a fairly small up-front investment.

"If he could have held on for another two weeks," Klop said, "everything would have worked out the way he'd intended. The dollar turned around, and it's still going up against the euro. Schepers saw it coming—but he got the timing wrong and lost it all."

Klop looked as if he'd made the doomed investment himself. He was far too cautious for such speculation, though.

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"Upstairs has put me temporarily in charge of Auto Loans. They're positive there's more bad news to come."

"Upstairs" meant the bank's directors.

"Will you take a look at this for me, Hank, see if you can at least find out what happened to those two cars?"

Before I'd finished my coffee, though, Klop's telephone provided another shock. Auto Loans also handled insurance, and now it turned out that one of the two Mercedes had been reported stolen several months earlier. Quite quickly—suspiciously quickly—Auto Loans had paid off on the claim.

"It could be worse, Klop. At least it was the cheaper of the pair, just a C320," I said, only half joking. "The buyer must still be driving the other one, and that one's a lot pricier. Second time around, he had a better idea of what he really wanted."

Klop was not amused. "Do you realize how much even the C series costs, Hank? You can't find one for under forty thousand."

Disgust, despair—Klop's tone spoke volumes.

From my vantage point, I watched the blood-red Mercedes E240 stand there glittering in the sun. You could almost smell the wealth and privilege, especially in that neighborhood. The cars parked around it were mostly midrange, none of them new. They were all on at least their second owners.

The little square in Amsterdam-South where I stood was intersected by a wide cross street. The Mercedes was registered to Marco de Bruin, salesman. That didn't really fit the neighborhood, either. You'd expect to find a salesman on the other side of the irrigation canal, where the houses were bigger and there was even the occasional villa to be seen. Of course, salesmen come in all shapes and sizes. Maybe de Bruin was just a minor hustler, but then what was he doing with a Mercedes? Maybe trying to look like a major hustler . . .

In this part of Amsterdam, many of the blocks were housing projects, originally thrown up for laborers and office personnel. The buildings, most of them, were due for their first major renovation. Trucks full of construction materials offered excellent cover for the itinerant investigator.

There was a playground on the other side of the square. There was a jungle gym and a sliding board, a knot of kids clambering up the one and whooshing down the other. The word "Fuckaduck" had been spray-painted on the side of the slide. The children looked Turkish to me. It surprised me to think that they knew English, on top of Dutch and their own language.

I stepped out from behind the truck and crossed the street, heading for the Mercedes. Klop had warned me that the E240

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might also have been stolen by now, same as the C320—"stolen" in quotation marks, he'd said. I took a good look at the license plate, though, and it was the right car. All four doors were locked.

"Hey, you! Get away from the car!" someone shouted.

I turned, and thought I saw a figure behind the curtains in one of the downstairs apartments. I couldn't make him out clearly, but that didn't bother me. What bothered me was the pistol pointing straight at me.

The downstairs apartments had tiny front gardens, with access via sliding-glass living-room doors. On each side of these doors was a small curtained window. There was a broken pane in one window, and the pistol's barrel was sticking through the hole in the glass. A man held the curtain a little to one side so he could aim in my direction.

"That's right, you see it. You want to *feel* it, too? Get the hell away from my car!"

"Mr. de Bruin? Marco de Bruin?" I called in an official voice.

It was quiet for a moment.

"What if I am?"

"My name is Stammer. I'm representing the Geldkrediet Bank."

The pistol disappeared, and a few moments later the dark green front door opened. I saw a thin young man. As I walked toward him, I saw that he'd been threatening me with an air pistol. It had seemed far more dangerous when I hadn't known for sure what it was.

"They're always messing with my car," he said.

He made a sweeping gesture with his arm, encompassing the children crowding the playground, but also, apparently, everyone else in the neighborhood. Even the grownups. Even me.

"Every once in a while, you have to scare them a little. And don't get me wrong, this thing can *sting.*" He raised the pistol. "I shot a pigeon right out of a tree last week. Thought I was out there washing the car just to give it a clean place to take a dump."

"I'd be careful, if I were you," I said. "Especially around the kids. All you need is a bunch of pissed-off parents banging on your door."

He shook his head stubbornly. "Not a problem. They find out one of their brats touched my car, they'll beat the crap out of him themselves. Those foreigners know exactly how much a Mercedes costs. One of them came by the other day, wanted to know what I'd take for it."

"As long as the bank still holds the paper, though, you wouldn't try to sell it, would you?"

He stared at me in silence. I noticed that he'd cut himself shaving. He didn't look like he could afford a new razor, let alone a car. He definitely fit the minor-hustler mold. His trousers were wrin-

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kled, and his striped shirt was a Goodwill special. On his feet were cheap, off-brand sneakers.

"I'm here for the keys," I said. "No payments, no car."

For a second, I thought he was about to spit on my outstretched palm.

Then, "What's your problem?" he said. "That's not the deal I made with your dude. I'm waiting for the cash. You guys know that. It won't be much longer—you'll get your money."

"We want it now, Marco. A deal's a deal. You haven't kept up the payments, so we take the car back. That's the way it works. You signed the papers yourself."

"Papers? What papers?" he said, stroking his chin. He glanced down at the air gun and stuck it clumsily in his pants pocket. "Mr. Schepers was supposed to take care of all that for me."

"Mr. Schepers isn't with us anymore."

"Naturally," he muttered. "I knew this would turn to shit. Look, I can explain everything."

"Including the stolen C320?"

He was dumbstruck. "What are you talking about?" he demanded. "Somebody stole it. Stuff happens. But the insurance covered it, it was all taken care of."

"I see," I said. "So then why did you need to finance *this* car, too? Why didn't you just pay for it with the insurance from the first one?"

He stared at me. "What do you care about the insurance? The insurance company doesn't care. They've got zillions."

"The insurance company is owned by the bank."

There was a momentary pause, and then he grinned. He was missing a tooth, I noticed.

"So you took quite a hit, then," he said.

He was starting to annoy me. "The keys," I said.

I took a step towards him, which put me practically inside his apartment. He was getting nervous: He took a step back and looked shiftily from side to side.

"You don't mean that," he said. "It's all gonna be fine, the money. I need the car for work. I can explain everything." He thought a moment. "You know what? We'll go see the dealer. They know the whole story."

"I'd be happy to believe you," I said, "if you'd let me see some cash. I'm not leaving without three thousand euros or the car. You pick."

"Three grand!" His voice was suddenly shrill. "You know I haven't got that kind of money. You have to give me a little time!"

He started in again about business, without explaining exactly *what* business he was in. I kept quiet. I knew the routine.

Finally, I agreed to ride along with him to the Mercedes dealer—

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who was sure to advance him a few thousand, he insisted. After all, he was a good customer.

What changed my mind was the realization that he was inviting me to sit inside the car, with the keys within hand's reach. And I was going to have to check out the dealer anyway.

De Bruin went inside to get a jacket. I watched him poke around for a piece of cardboard to prop inside the broken windowpane. He came out in an old leather bomber jacket with a wide collar and epaulets. The keys were in his hand.

Crossing the street, we had to jump out of the way when a heavy black Honda motorcycle carrying a rider and passenger roared past.

"Hey!" de Bruin called after it. "Watch it, you jerk!"

The biker slowed down, and his passenger turned back to face us. You couldn't see their faces through the tinted visors of their helmets. Both of them wore full leathers with the Honda logo on the back.

"Bikers are such jackoffs," said de Bruin, opening the Mercedes' passenger door for me as the motorcycle picked up speed and disappeared around a corner. "They think they own the road."

During the drive, de Bruin bragged nonstop about the beauty of the E240, and I had to admit that he was right. You barely heard a whisper from under the hood. It accelerated smoothly and ran like a dream. When I didn't argue with him, his self-confidence accelerated as smoothly as the car. He assured me four separate times that the Mercedes dealer would lend him the three thousand euros I was demanding. He even chewed me out when I made a minor readjustment to the side-view mirror on my side.

The dealership was in Buitenveldert, in a big showroom on the ground floor of a huge apartment block. There was a parking area in front, and no kids around to smudge the car's brilliant paint job with their greasy fingers.

We were the only customers at that hour. A fellow about my age came out to meet us. He wore a spiffy blue-gray suit, a white shirt, and a striped silk tie. He was perfectly clean-shaven. His gaze seemed slightly clouded, and he forced a smile when he saw de Bruin.

"Ah, Mr. de Bruin. What can we do for you? No problems, I hope. I saw you pull in, and everything looks just right—but I told you, it's a heck of a car." He turned to me. "Or is your friend interested in a Mercedes?" He said it dubiously, unsure whether I *was* de Bruin's friend or something else.

"I'm with the Geldkrediet Bank," I said as we strolled towards the showroom. "Mr. de Bruin has been having some trouble making his payments, and the bank has decided to repossess the car."

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"It's not gonna come to that," de Bruin snapped. "I told you, they'll take care of it. Just give me five minutes to work it out!"

The car salesman had edged away from him, and I also stepped back, leaving him standing all by himself, like a shipwrecked sailor on a desert island.

"Well," the salesman said hesitantly. "This can't be very pleasant for you, Mr. de Bruin."

"Pleasant?" de Bruin snarled. "You want to talk about pleasant? I'll tell you what won't be pleasant. If you don't hand me three thousand euros, I'm going straight to your wife, and I'm gonna let her know what you've been smoking back there in your office between customers. You knew damn well I didn't have the money when I bought the car, but you were happy to sell it to me and you haven't said no to those bags of herb I tip you with. Now you're going to help me out of a jam—three thousand euros doesn't mean a thing to you."

He grabbed the salesman by the lapels. He didn't really seem dangerous to me; his bluster looked more like begging than a threat. But the salesman took him seriously. He kneed de Bruin hard in the groin, and de Bruin staggered back, his face drained of color. For a moment it looked as if he might throw up on the showroom floor. He collapsed, and covered his crotch with shaking hands. If I hadn't been there, the salesman would have kicked him in the head with a perfectly polished wingtip.

"I should have done that when you first came in here, you dirty little loser," the salesman hissed. "You think I let a nobody like you threaten me in my own place? You watch yourself, little man. You ever set foot in here again—you go anywhere *near* my wife—I'll have a couple of my mechanics teach you some manners."

His face was red with anger.

"Okay, now," I said, just to be doing something.

"It's *not* okay," the salesman cried. "You've got your own problems with him—otherwise you wouldn't be here."

"Well, you're the one who sold him the car," I said. "Wait a minute, what am I saying? You're the one who sold him *two* cars. You figured you could make some money off him. Or am I missing something?"

De Bruin had risen to his knees and was sucking in deep breaths. His hands were still clutching his privates.

"Sure, I sold him two cars," the salesman argued, "but only because Mr. Schepers vouched for him. You don't think *I* sent *him* to Auto Loans? They came in together, and Mr. Schepers guaranteed me the financing wouldn't be a problem. What was I supposed to do? I mean, I sell cars, that's what I *do*. And you can't always judge by appearance. I had a rock singer in here, he looked to me like he was stoned to the gills, but he had a pocket full of

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five-hundred-euro notes. Fifty thousand euros, cash, and he wasn't leaving without a Mercedes, he said. I had to go to the bank with him to make sure the bills were real. Not that I was worried. I've seen him on TV, his records sell like crazy. My own kids buy them, so do all their friends. The guy's rich, but you wouldn't know it to look at him."

"This one says he's a salesman," I said, pointing down at de Bruin.

Who reached out a hand to me.

I helped him up.

"Jesus," he groaned. "Jesus, that hurts." His face spasmed. "I gotta ralph."

Before I could make a move, the salesman took him by the arm and had him halfway back to the big glass showroom door. I tagged along, and a minute later de Bruin was tossing his cookies on the asphalt of the parking area. He didn't have all that many cookies to toss, but it took him quite awhile to toss them. When he was finished, he stood there bent forward at the waist, gasping.

"Sit in the car," I said. "Try to pull yourself together."

He nodded and handed over the keys. I opened the door on the passenger side and helped him in. He leaned back against the leather, but he didn't seem to appreciate the comfort he'd been bragging about twenty minutes earlier. I got in behind the wheel.

After a while, de Bruin seemed to be tracking again.

"Bastard," he said, looking over at the showroom.

The salesman was nowhere to be seen. He'd apparently gone back to his office.

"He's a freaking liar. He's the one who put me and Schepers together. I'll tell your boss the whole story, if you want; he'll be very interested. I could write a book about all the dirty little games he and Schepers were playing." He was getting his nerve back. "You saw it yourself, he attacked me. I'll get even."

I thought about it. I had the keys. I had to deliver the car to the bank, anyway. Why not take de Bruin along and let him talk to Klop?

De Bruin insisted we stop off at his office to pick up what he called his "evidence."

"Where *is* your office?" I asked.

He glared at me as if I'd insulted him, but then told me to head for the Central Station.

"And be careful with my car," he added when a light turned red and I didn't come to a stop quickly enough to suit him.

By the time we hit downtown, I was feeling more comfortable behind the wheel. All I had to do was stop thinking about my own car, an old VW. Every once in a while, de Bruin did some backseat

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driving, but for the most part his attention was still focused between his legs.

"Stop here," he said at last. "I'll be right back."

I watched him go into an old warehouse in Spui Street, not far from a line of pricey tourist hotels. An illuminated yellow sign over the warehouse door said "Club Kitty" in English. "Open all day and all night."

"That's some car, mister," a voice said.

A slim young woman, maybe twenty-three or twenty-four, had appeared beside the Mercedes, running the tips of her long white acrylic fingernails slowly along the edge of the half-open driver's window. Her hair was dyed the same dead white as her fake nails, and she wore a faded black micro-skirt over fishnet stockings and a V-necked T-shirt with the sleeves slit off. It too had been white, once upon a time, but too many wash cycles—or too few—had left it a dingy gray. Her face was probably the same color beneath too much clumsily applied makeup.

"Can you spare a cigarette? Or maybe we could take a ride?"

The way she said it suggested she wasn't really interested in smoking or riding. Her Dutch was clumsy, her accent Slavic.

"Buzz off, Vera," said de Bruin, swinging open the passenger door. He eased himself carefully into the seat.

"This is your office?" I said. "So you run the sex club where Schepers died, is that it?"

"Like you didn't already know," he said. "Yeah, this is my place. At least, I'm one of the partners. Why do you think I needed that insurance money? And I use the car to pick up customers and bring them home after. It makes a nice impression. I was supposed to take Schepers home that night, and then all of a sudden he was dead in one of the rooms. We had to straighten him up a little—didn't want it to look like the girls had killed him." He gazed over at his sex club. "I thought the publicity would be bad for business, but go figure: Soon as the story leaked out, the thrill-seekers started showing up, wanting to see where it happened. A couple more days like this, I'll be able to pay off all my debts. You'll get your share, don't worry." He groaned, but that was still because of the pain. "And that bastard at the dealership, he'll get what's coming to *him,* too."

I started the car and pulled carefully out into traffic. I gave a little gas, then stomped on the brake when the car in front of us unexpectedly came to a halt.

"Hey, watch out!" cried de Bruin. He hadn't fastened his seat belt. "What are you doing?"

Two men jumped out of the car.

"Police!" they shouted. "Step out of the Mercedes. Step out!"

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"Dammit," de Bruin muttered, reaching inside his leather jacket.

I jumped when he pulled out the pistol. My seat belt unclasped easily, but de Bruin still beat me out of the car. He aimed his weapon at the detectives, who dodged behind their vehicle. I heard a motorcycle behind me, and then a man in black leathers and a helmet with a tinted visor grabbed me by the neck. A second man, similarly outfitted, was dismounting from the bike and setting it on its kickstand. I recognized them by the Honda logos on their leathers.

"Police!" the second biker screamed from under his helmet. "Don't move! Drop the gun!"

"Don't shoot," I cried. "Don't shoot! It's just an air pistol!"

"Right, I'm an idiot," said de Bruin. "You think I'd go up against that ripoff artist at the dealership with a stupid air gun? This one's the real thing. You bastards want my car? Come and get it!"

To my astonishment, he shot a giant star in the rear window of the car the officers had been driving. I saw one of them waving a badge folder from behind the front bumper. I don't know why he bothered. Nobody was doubting they were cops.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that the biker had unzipped his leathers and pulled out a gun. His colleague pushed me into the asphalt and pressed his knee against my spine. On the other side of the Mercedes, de Bruin fired again. Two more shots sounded from much closer to my ear.

I lay with my cheek pressed against the road and could see de Bruin's legs and feet on the other side of the Mercedes. I watched him slump to the asphalt.

"He's hit," the man holding me down called out. "His buddy's unarmed."

He let me go. I got slowly to my feet and assumed the position. De Bruin wasn't moving. One of the cops pulled his jacket open. The brown leather was drenched with blood, which had also spattered onto the hood of the Mercedes.

"There's nothing on him," the man yelled. "Where's the damn weed? I don't see anything in the car."

My policeman slapped the side of my head.

"Where is it?" he demanded.

He patted me down, but I had nothing for him to find.

"This one hasn't got it, either," he called to his colleagues. "You check the club, maybe it's still in there. I'll check the trunk." He pulled me away from the car. "Open it."

I wasn't really paying attention. I was looking at de Bruin's blood on the hood of the Mercedes. They weren't quite the same shade of red, after all. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

COLD CALL

by Budge Burgess

It was a two-mile, bone-jarring ride from the main road to the big house. The few people who lived in isolated cottages, farmhouses, and hamlets along the coast still referred to it as "the main road," but it had long since fallen victim to the anorexia of a bypass and settled into bucolic anonymity, troubled only by the mundane passage of locals heading to or from shops or jobs or schools in the small towns of Dumfries and Kirkcudbright. On a bleak January night, the sole travelers along its length were wind, chill rain, creeping black ice, and the rumor of sleet or snow.

No one inside Quicksilver House was aware of the little man's approach. They sat around its spacious withdrawing room enjoying the skirmish of conversation, the crackling musketry of the log fire, and the knowledge that they were safe from the booming artillery of the gale, banished without to rattle the windowpanes in frustration.

The figure who negotiated the two miles from road to house could see its welcoming lights now. He felt less than safe. Short and slender, the wind buffeted him, arresting his progress with

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gusting tackles, the next moment threatening to cast him into a ditch like so much detritus. A grapeshot of rain stung his face. Occasionally a volley of twigs would pepper him and remind him to keep a wary eye out for more substantial projectiles falling from the overhanging trees.

Not that he had an eye to spare. In the dense blackness it took all his concentration and failing, middle-aged sight to chart a course along the drive. Quite how long it had been since the surface was last repaired, he had no idea. When originally built in eighteen hundred, its owner had lavished money and attention on every aspect of the house and its approach. That was an era of abundant cheap labor, and one which encouraged enterprise amongst its naval officers.

Richard Turnbull never quite achieved the glories of a Nelson or Cochrane, but he learned how to use a frigate profitably. Skill in authorized piracy was a local specialty; a former neighbor of Turnbull's family, one John Paul, had gone to the Americas and founded a navy. Richard Turnbull sailed to brief fame and glory aboard the frigate *Quicksilver*, captured a substantial French prize—a man-o'-war, no less, plus the treasure ship it was escorting—then retired to the safety of commissioning, building, rigging, and outfitting Quicksilver House . . . and a less fraught engagement, finding a suitable wife to complement the soft furnishings of his new, landlocked command.

The drive, in eighteen hundred, must have been an elegant coach ride. Twentieth-century trucks, tractors, and agricultural machinery had rutted and potholed the way until it was as stomach-churning and bone-jarring a passage as rounding the Horn. Even had there still been abundant cheap labor, it would have been prohibitively expensive to maintain.

The small talk in the big house was steering round to bedtime and an early night, safe from the elements. Yawns and drawn silences punctuated the conversation. No one heard the little man's yells or curses as he fell over a fallen branch, risked an ankle in a sudden rut, or was brought to his knees by an irascible pothole. The first they heard of him was the frantic *rat-a-tat-tat* of

If there ever was a story well-suited to production as an Agatha Christie-style stage play or theatrical movie it's Budge Burgess's "Cold Call." The Scottish writer, critic, and reviewer has never had the pleasure (or displeasure) of seeing any of his work on stage or screen, but he is currently at work on a script in which the BBC has expressed interest. We don't know the script's subject, but the author has an interest in, and a flair for, historical fiction. ¶

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the heavy brass knocker.

The company fell silent. Five pairs of eyes turned to Jimmy Turnbull. He adopted an annoyed expression, one which synthesized the question, *Who could it be at this time of night?* with the response that no one fool enough to venture out could reasonably expect an answer.

Rat-a-tat-tat broke the silence again . . . or at least struck a bleak counterpoint to the banshee wind. *Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!*

"Is that someone at the door?" Helen Turnbull hurled the question at her husband.

The Turnbulls' four guests averted their eyes from the potential domestic squabble and stared deep into the fire. Such a shame their hosts didn't have a servant or two.

Jimmy could feel the comfort of his armchair seduce him deeper into its embrace. His wife tensed, sitting forward on her seat, fingers drumming on kneecaps, staring at her husband in an attempt to shame him from his cushioned lair.

Rat-a-tat-tat-ta-tat-tat-tat!

"Damn you, Jimmy, damn you!" Helen leapt from her place and padded, barefoot, across the room. In her early thirties—and twenty years younger than her husband—she had a lithe, trim, and easy movement, maintained by thrice-weekly ports of call at a gym in Dumfries.

She reached the front door and flung it open impatiently, careless of wind, rain, or intrusion. Quite who or what she expected to find, she didn't know, but she'd already prepared a broadside of accusation and complaint for whatever inopportune target had disturbed her comfort and contentment.

Swift as a frigate, the little man disarmed her before she could bring her attack to bear. "You are all right, aren't you?" he demanded, grabbing her arms and pushing anxiously past. He swept across the hall and into the withdrawing room unannounced and uninvited. "Thank God! Thank God! I'm in time. You're all still here."

Helen Turnbull slammed the door shut and followed in the little man's wake of dripping rainwater. She stood behind him, jaw sagging, eyes gaping, body limp with confusion. He was around five foot four, skinny, dressed in inexpensive, store-bought brown shoes, gray trousers, and short, pale car coat. And he was wet. *Dreechit* was the Scots word which came to mind. Soaked from head to toe, with muddy stains about his clothing and hands.

"I'm sorry . . . " Helen stammered, wind stolen from her sails, conscious the five people in the withdrawing room were looking to her for explanation and assuming she'd admitted the stranger.

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"No, I'm sorry," said the little man, turning to face her. "Forgive my intrusion, but this is an emergency."

She could see the anguish on his face, the hint of relief, the tinge of pain—the knee of his trousers was torn, and she could imagine a cut or graze beneath. She was about to ask if he'd been in an accident when he spun round in alarm.

"But there are only six of you! Where's the seventh? Where's the child?"

Six people exchanged glances, playing pass-the-parcel, speculating on who would be the one to phone the police and get this lunatic taken away.

"There should be a child. Where's the child?"

"Surely that was last month, dear? If you've been following some star, I think you've missed a turning somewhere."

Emily Hunter sat back on the couch, her smile warped somewhat by the alcoholic glaze to her eyes. She waited for laughter, for some approval of her joke. Instead, she registered group embarrassment . . . and increased the agitation of the little man.

He strode into the middle of the room, hesitated, then advanced to the fire and began to warm himself.

"Excuse me, Mister . . . Mister . . . " Jimmy Turnbull leaned forward in his chair.

"Mossop. Pergolesi Mossop," said the little man, bowing slightly, a polite smile on his face. "Forgive my intrusion but—"

"Pergolesi?" Molly McKendrick was a dedicated teacher of English by day, and a passionate lover of classical music at all times.

"My mother was a big fan of the composer, used to make her cry," explained Mr. Mossop. He waited while this gem sank in.

The smile of approval on Molly's face seemed to imply that this man was safe, that surely no one called Pergolesi—writer of sacred music—could possibly mean ill to the assembled company. Her relieved smile relaxed the others, gave Mr. Mossop grace and room to continue his explanation.

"Forgive my intrusion," he repeated, "but I've been troubled for days by a persistent dream. In it, I saw this very house, this very room, and seven people. I pictured this place perfectly—it's exactly as I saw it in my dreams."

"Hang on, Mr. Mossop," interrupted Jimmy. "This is beginning to sound like the plot of a cheap horror movie."

"Oh, I know, I know." Mossop adopted a conciliatory pose. "I'm not crazy, though I must admit, there have been times this last week when I thought I was going out of my mind. No, this is real, very real. I dreamed of this place, you see, of you, and of the tragedy which befalls you. I came here to stop it."

"Isn't it about now the electricity goes off and we're left with just the light of the fire?"

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Everyone turned to stare at Emily.

"Not in my dream," reassured Mossop. "In my dream, the lights stay on, but three of you die."

The heat from the fire and the warmth of the room drained perceptibly.

"It's all here, exactly as I pictured it. Except for the child. Is there, perhaps, a child sleeping upstairs?"

"You think three of us are going to die, Mr. Mossop?" Helen hovered, uncertain whether to resume her seat or remain standing. She elected to stand, to maintain her height advantage and retain some authority over the visitor. "Which three? And how?"

Six faces in that room chorused tolerant scepticism . . . with a leitmotif of alarm. The little man was clearly insane—eccentric, at least—but he was obviously harmless, and had an amusing quality which might entertain for a few minutes, if baited and played properly.

"I don't know." Mossop hung his head. "I can't see that. I see only bodies. I see the shapes of bodies. I can't see their faces."

"Hang on a minute, hang on!" Alec McKendrick, police inspector, stood up and glared down at the little man. "You wander in here off the streets and start frightening everybody with some scary story about dreams and deaths. Who are you? What do you think you're playing at?"

"I didn't just wander in off the streets. I drove up from Manchester yesterday. I knew the dream was of somewhere in Scotland, somewhere around here. I've been driving up and down the coast road all day, trying to find this place. I only found it after dark. As I came round a bend in the road I finally recognized the house sign and the gates. My car stopped. It just stopped! Refused to move. So I had to walk all the way here. It wasn't easy."

The miserable, *dreechit* little figure did not need to elaborate on that last remark. He stood before the fire, steam rising, a puddle growing beneath him.

"As to who I am, I am Pergolesi Mossop, piano tuner. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. I've never had premonitions or anything like this. But my dreams have been so real, I had to come and try to save you. This is no game. I'm not playing at anything."

McKendrick inspected the little man. He seemed agitated, he looked a mess, but he could well be sincere. That merely left the question of his sanity.

"Have you ever been here before," asked McKendrick, "say on holiday? Maybe just passed down the road and noticed this house through the trees? Maybe you . . ."

Rat-tat-tat-tat-a-rat-a-tat-tat.

They all turned and stared towards the front door.

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Helen Turnbull was closest. She moved towards it with a resigned look, and with some reluctance. She turned the lock slowly and slipped the door open a fraction.

"What are you doing here?"

As she pulled the door wide, a car—a taxi—could be heard setting off back down the drive; the young woman who strode into the hallway, shaking rain from her ankle-length coat as she peeled it off and slung it over the bannister end, made a theatrical entry into the withdrawing room.

"Hi, Dad," she called, smiling at Turnbull and waving to the assembly. "You don't look very glad to see me."

"Your daughter?" asked Mossop without awaiting an answer. "Then the child is here."

The newcomer looked at him.

"Mr. Mossop has had a premonition, Kirsty," explained Molly. "He came here to warn us of danger, but expected to find seven people. You, apparently, are the missing seventh, the child."

"The child? Oh, Daddy, and I thought I'd grown into a young woman." She hugged her father and fired a scornful look across Mossop's bow. "You're not all falling for some superstitious claptrap, are you?"

The company, however, was gripped in a stranglehold of silence.

Finally, Jimmy Turnbull spoke. "I'm sorry, Mr. Mossop, but we have guests, and now my daughter has returned home from university. It's been very entertaining listening to your story, but I think perhaps it's time you were leaving." He picked up the phone and began to punch in numbers. "I'll just order you a taxi." He jabbed at the instrument. "Damn. Seems like the line's down."

Helen glided across the room to her handbag and rummaged through it. "I can't find my phone. I must have left it somewhere."

One by one, each of them reached for jackets or bags. One by one they registered surprise at the absence of their phones.

"This . . . this can't be happening," stammered Jimmy.

"In my dream," confirmed Mossop, "no one could find a phone. The murderer had seen to that."

Despite the warm glow of the roaring fire and the elegant profusion of halogen lighting around the walls, a gloom descended on the company.

"Mr. Mossop." Alec McKendrick adopted his most threatening tone. "I think you've done quite enough. My wife's worried. I don't want to hear any more of your fairy stories."

Andy Carson, taciturn most of the evening and, until now, the silent member of the entourage, eased himself from his seat and crossed the room, jangling car keys in his pocket. "I've a phone in the car," he announced matter-of-factly. He made his way out into

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the night, confident that his actions would speak louder than words.

"What exactly happens in your dream, Mr. Mossop?" Emily's eyes had lost their alcoholic glaze and her relaxed posture had been usurped by an unfamiliar tension.

"It's all very indistinct." Mossop buried his face in his hands and took a couple of deep breaths. "I can see the house, I can see the driveway, I can see the hall and this room perfectly. I could have described the wallpaper and paintings and the ornaments on the mantel without ever entering the building."

Mossop shivered, turned his back on the assembly while he made prominent show of warming his hands at the fire.

"I can see each and every one of you clearly," he continued. "Except . . . except the child. I had not pictured her, just knew there was a child present. I think . . . I think perhaps I was seeing things through her eyes."

Attention turned to Kirsty.

She shook her head vigorously. "I've never had any dreams about this place . . . well, not about people dying." She licked her lips nervously. The bravado of her entry had gone, replaced suddenly by the gaucheness of a nineteen-year-old who wished she was a child again and could be reassured by an adult that there were no ghosts or ghoulies lurking in the shadows.

The seconds dragged in silence. Kirsty was not the only one craving reassurance and comfort. Expectant eyes turned to the doorway as Carson returned.

"My phone's wrecked and all the cars are dead," he announced, standing in the doorway, sleeves rolled up, oily marks on his hands and jumper.

Jimmy Turnbull rose as if to get his car keys.

"All of them, Jimmy. Even yours and Helen's. Someone's done a job of cutting cables and destroying the electrics. There's no chance of getting any of them to move."

Carson's words bore ominous authority. He owned a garage in Dumfries. If he couldn't get a car to start, no one else could.

Emily started to cry, quietly. Kirsty went and sat on the arm of her father's chair and draped her arms round his shoulders. Jimmy hugged her mechanically. Molly and Helen stared at the fire. Carson hovered in the doorway, unable to script further action now his cameo role had ended. Inspector Alec McKendrick stood, calming his nerves, trying to work out what a policeman should do in a situation like this.

"It seems to me," resumed Mossop, "that if I am seeing the dream through the eyes of the child—of the young lady—then she, indeed, survives. What my dream doesn't tell me is who kills whom, where, when, how, or why. Perhaps that means that you,

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young lady, don't witness the actual killings."

"So as long as we all stay with Kirsty, nothing will happen?" Emily implored Mossop to nod, to signal agreement.

Mossop's face remained expressionless. He was lost, deep in thought, speculating on whether or not the child could be present at the murders.

"Maybe," he concluded, "maybe she is witness to the murders but erases that memory, doesn't let me see it in my dream."

"This is all getting a bit Freudian." Helen Turnbull looted Carson's cigarette packet from the coffee table and lit the first cigarette she'd smoked in four years. She wavered, dizzily, as the first lungful made her head spin. "Besides, it can't be a memory. It hasn't happened yet."

"Nothing's happened yet, and nothing will happen." Alec, too, stole a cigarette from the packet, his first in a week. "This is all a load of garbage and we're working ourselves into a lather just because some loony waltzes in out of the rain. Nobody here had any intention of killing anyone. Then Mossop arrives and suddenly we're acting out a Hitchcock movie."

"How do you explain the missing phones and wrecked cars?" Kirsty's voice had an edge of hysteria. "Someone must have been hard at work long before Mr. Mossop got here."

"Somebody," said Carson, "is determined that nobody is going to leave here or phone for help. Somebody's planned all this."

He'd emphasized his point by shaking his hand vigorously to the beat of his words. Only his hand wasn't empty. Unlike a concert conductor, he wasn't holding a slim baton but a large, homicidally heavy wrench. It was now the focus of everyone's attention. His face flushed bright red.

"I . . . I got some tools from my car. I . . . I thought . . ."

"You thought you'd better arm yourself. Just in case." The inspector's tone indicated that he wasn't about to tolerate the presence of a weapon.

"Was the killer Colonel Mustard, with a wrench, in the conservatory?" giggled Emily.

"Shut up!" Molly tore at her hair and began to sob.

"Put that damn thing away, Carson." Jimmy Turnbull stood facing the other man.

Carson took a step back, his grip tightening faster on the wrench.

"None of you knew I was coming." Mossop's words broke the tension. "My car stopped back on the main road. I think it's just out of fuel. If I could syphon some from one of your tanks . . ."

"There's a jerrycan in the garage," explained Jimmy.

"You know about cars?" Mossop directed his inquiry at Carson. "Perhaps if you come with me, we could get my car started. It's a

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bit of a walk in this weather, but . . ."

Carson nodded, relieved of the excuse to get away and end the building confrontation. He buttoned up his coat and led the little man out into the night.

The remaining six figures sat in quiet contemplation, hooded eyes casting suspicious glances here and there. Presently, Helen rose.

"I'll make some coffee," she said, disappearing towards the kitchen.

"I'll give you a hand." Her husband followed, reassuring everyone that, "The coffee'll be better with a shot of whisky in it."

"And then there were four," quipped Emily.

The minutes ticked by. There came the occasional clink of a coffee mug, the closing of a drawer or cupboard door, then the aroma of fresh, strong coffee wafted into the room.

Helen reappeared, carrying a large tray burdened with steaming mugs. The coffee smell grew more intense, but there was another fragrance, the sharp, peaty tang of whisky. She placed the tray on the coffee table. She'd expected to be the center of attention, but was conscious that no one was looking at her. She turned.

"Jimmy!"

Her husband stood in the doorway, bottle of whisky in one hand, shotgun cradled under his other arm.

"Jimmy, don't be stupid." Inspector McKendrick tensed and leaned forward, debating whether to try and keep this low-key or to act decisively and take the weapon from his host.

"Dad!" Kirsty looked ashen and was visibly shaking. "Daddy?"

"It's all right, sweetheart," reassured Turnbull. "I started thinking, started wondering which of us could have disabled the cars."

"We all arrived pretty much together," advised Alec. "None of us left the house again. You were standing waiting. You watched Molly and me leave our car and walk to the door. Emily and Carson were right behind. They didn't have time to tamper with the cars. Whoever did it would have got wet, and must've got some oil on their hands."

He glanced at Emily. She was bare armed, hands clean and perfectly manicured. As if to confirm her innocence she held them up and allowed the audience to inspect them.

"Carson and I came straight in," she said.

"Mossop was soaking wet," reminded Helen. "We don't know how long he was out there. And his hands were muddy. He could've done that deliberately to hide any trace of oil."

"And he's the one who conjured up this cock-and-bull story about deaths," continued the inspector.

"Oh, Christ, and he's out there with Carson!" Emily rose and moved unsteadily towards the door.

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Alec McKendrick sprang up and caught her. "You stay here. Jimmy, I think I'd better take that."

Turnbull considered the shotgun for a moment. He moved as if to deliver it to the inspector's outstretched hands, then hesitated. "Sorry, Alec, but I think I'd rather keep ahold of it. Suppose . . . suppose the pair of us go after them?"

"No, Jimmy," pleaded Helen. "You've had too much to drink. You can't go out there. . . ."

Her head nodded barely perceptibly towards McKendrick. The suspicion in her voice was thick as molasses.

"Helen, I . . . " The inspector looked hurt. "I'm a policeman, Helen."

"You wouldn't be the first policeman to commit a murder." She larded each word with righteous anger. "If anyone's going with Jimmy, it'll be me."

Her tall, athletic frame suddenly took on a reassuring confidence. Weak and frail woman she certainly was not.

"We could all go," suggested Kirsty. "I don't see anybody killed. As long as I'm with you, nothing will happen."

"This is insane." Molly tugged at her hair. "We're friends. We're all friends. Nobody wants to kill anybody. We were perfectly happy until that crazy little man arrived."

"But somebody does want to murder some of us," complained Kirsty. "Somebody's gone to great lengths to keep us here without phones or transport. And maybe that little man isn't so crazy. He predicted there would be seven of us here. None of you knew I was coming down tonight. Hell, I didn't even know myself until this evening. It was just a spur-of-the-moment thing. I needed to talk to my dad about . . . "

"About what?" Turnbull glared at his daughter, concerned father replaying all his worst fears about pregnancy, illness, or some other horror.

"I'm having some problems at college," she continued. "I'm behind with my work. I've not got my essays in on time. I . . . I might have to leave."

"So you think there might be something to Mossop's story about having these dreams?" The inspector was a rational man, but he knew several police forces had enlisted the help of psychics from time to time. He was doing his best to keep an open mind, but scepticism was winning out.

"He predicted there'd be seven of us," Kirsty repeated. "And now he's out there with the only person with oily hands. What if the cars were okay until Carson went out to them? What if he disabled them then?"

"We've only got his word for it that the cars won't start." Helen looked around for agreement. "Suppose he hasn't actually done

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anything to them, just got some oil on his hands to make us believe his story?"

"When we all went through to the dining room for dinner, Carson made some excuse about leaving something in here. He could have collected all the phones then." Molly edged round in her seat to confront Emily.

"Hang about!" Emily was suddenly alert and sober. "Carson's just my date for the evening. I've only known him for a week or so. If he's up to something, it's nothing to do with me."

"I'm going to check the cars," declared Jimmy.

"Not alone. I'm coming with you." Helen shot a glance at McKendrick. "You stay here, Alec. Look after the others."

McKendrick wavered. The appeal on his wife's face determined his response. "Okay."

The four of them remained waiting, anchored to their seats, hawser-tense, lost in individual thought.

The minutes ticked by.

A log on the fire cracked suddenly. Everyone jumped. Emily giggled briefly.

Outside, the wind shook the trees and played against the window glass, a draft stirring the heavy drapes.

Kirsty looked imploringly at McKendrick. "What's keeping them?"

McKendrick rose. He gave his wife a reassuring look. "I'll just go to the door. I'll be able to see them from there."

The others followed him into the hallway and watched as he peered out into the night.

"Jimmy! Helen!"

McKendrick waited.

The wind howled and hurled handfuls of rain into the house. McKendrick brushed the water from his face.

"Jimmy! Helen! Where are you?"

Only the wind replied, sighing mournfully.

"Kirsty, does your father have a flashlight?"

Kirsty disappeared off to the kitchen and returned with a heavy black object. McKendrick took it and directed its powerful beam out into the darkness. He played it around the cars and over to the garage in the former stables to the right of the house.

"Jimmy! Helen!"

Still only the wind answered.

"I'm going to have to go out there. Kirsty, lock the door behind me."

The three women huddled together behind the closed door, arms locked round Molly.

The silence hung heavy, but no one could raise the courage to speak.

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Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat.

"Who is it?" called Kirsty, freezing in mid act of opening the door.

"It's me. It's Alec. Let me in."

She opened the door hesitantly. McKendrick slipped inside and slammed it behind him, drawing the heavy bolts. He was dripping wet. His face was drained of color, his lips chilled to a blue tint.

He faced Kirsty for a moment, shook his head, then sped into the withdrawing room. By the time the women had followed him there he was taking a swig from the whisky bottle.

"They're out there. I found them. They're both dead. Their heads . . ."

As he took another drink from the bottle, the bloodstains on his shirt and hands became obvious. No amount of rain could wash away that gore.

Kirsty screamed and fainted. Molly rushed to embrace her husband. Emily loitered above the teenager's prone figure, struggling to overcome her feelings of nausea.

Molly clung on tight to her husband. "What do we do now? What do we do?"

"I don't know. But the shotgun's gone. Whoever attacked Jimmy must've taken it." McKendrick looked around. "Emily. Switch off the lights. Quickly."

He led his wife across the darkened room and bent to pick up Kirsty.

"Quick. Help me with her. We'll be safer upstairs."

As they contrived to raise the girl from the floor she began to stir. McKendrick smacked her face with rapid pats.

"Kirsty! Kirsty! Does your father have another gun, Kirsty?"

Still dazed, she shook her head. "Just the shotgun. Oh God, Daddy!"

The four quickly made their way upstairs and barricaded themselves in one of the bedrooms. McKendrick found the only available weapon—Kirsty's old hockey stick. They huddled in a corner, lights out, listening for any movement on the stairs or in the corridor. McKendrick peered out the window gingerly. There was no sign of human movement.

Minutes passed in silent routine: listen for any noise, periodically squint out the window. Nothing.

And then a shot.

The concussion made them all jump.

McKendrick eased the curtain aside and looked out into the night. He could see no one.

Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat.

They could dimly hear a voice echoing up the stairwell.

Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat.

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McKendrick shifted the pile of furniture away from the door and opened it a crack.

Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat.

He could hear the voice more distinctly now.

"Help. Let me in. It's Mossop. Help me."

Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat.

McKendrick moved to the staircase and yelled his challenge at the front door.

"What is it, Mossop? What do you want?"

"He's killed them!" *Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat.* "He's killed them!" *Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat.* "But I got him with the shotgun." *Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat.*

McKendrick descended the stairs until he reached the hallway.

"What happened, Mossop?"

"He hit me with the wrench. Thought he'd killed me. But I came round and made my way back. I found the Turnbulls. They're dead. I saw Carson making his way round the side of the house. Followed him. Let me in. Let me in. It'll be easier if you let me in."

"Just tell me what happened, Mossop."

"I sneaked up on him. He thought I was dead, didn't expect me. I knocked him down with a tree branch. He got up. Came for me. I grabbed the shotgun. I think he's dead. Let me in."

"Where's the shotgun now?"

"I've got it. I've got it. Let me in!"

McKendrick sped through to the kitchen and opened a window.

Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat. "Let me in! Please let me in!"

"Listen, Mossop. I've opened the kitchen window. I want you to go round the side of the house and push the shotgun in through it. Once you've done that, I'll let you in."

He waited for a moment or two then called up to Kirsty. "Where does your father keep the shotgun cartridges?"

"In the kitchen," she replied, creeping down the stairs. "I'll show you."

By the time they reached the kitchen they heard a heavy object fall onto its floor. Clutching the hockey stick tightly, McKendrick crawled across the darkened room. He found the shotgun on the floor. With a rapid movement he pulled the window shut and locked it. He could see no one outside.

"Where?"

Kirsty pointed to a drawer to his right. He crept over and felt within it. He reloaded the weapon and took up a position covering the front door, signaling Kirsty to open it.

"Keep out of my line of fire!"

She moved to the door.

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"Mossop! You there?"

Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat. "Let me in!"

He nodded to Kirsty. She undid the bolts and catch and let the door spring open. Mossop practically fell in. He staggered groggily across the hall, the shoulder of his coat dark with blood.

"Right, Mossop. Lie down! Lie down on the floor!"

They found a length of washing line and tied up the little man. Leaving Kirsty with the hockey stick, McKendrick slipped outside. He found Carson's body beside the house, the torso gouged open by shotgun blast.

The police arrived an hour later, three squad cars tearing to a halt in the driveway. Kirsty had retrieved her old bicycle from the garage and pedaled off on flat tires to raise the alarm, pounding on the door of the nearest cottage until its furious owner let her in.

Mossop sat in the train, returning to Manchester. The inquest and court had heard his story and the evidence from the survivors. What little forensic evidence was left by the rain had corroborated his account. Carson was on the verge of bankruptcy and was pleading with Turnbull to lend him money. Turnbull, however, had seen an opportunity to acquire Carson's business cheaply and was freezing him out. Carson, the court concluded, had murdered the Turnbulls and attempted to murder Mossop. Mossop had later killed Carson in self-defense.

Pergolesi Mossop was now a man in some demand. The newspapers carried his story of the dream and premonition of the deaths. Celebrity status had brought him a lucrative newspaper exclusive, a book deal, and various other media options. The piano tuner had never before been in such demand.

Yet he was not an entirely happy man. He sat on the train, watching the countryside go by, his mind drifting back to that day in August, last year, at the Edinburgh Festival. He had an annual contract at the Festival, maintaining pianos for one of the concert halls. Not an arduous job. He was highly skilled and was retained merely to check over the instruments. It left him plenty of free time.

Time to drift out into the city and become caught up in the frantic surreal life of the Festival. He toured the streets, enjoying the clowns, entertainers, and musicians who turned every available spot into an instant theater. He toured the pubs and clubs, listening to the comedy and music and drama and monologues.

He was particularly taken by one Fringe artist who ran a comedy show entitled *So You Want to Commit the Perfect Murder?* The comedian would quiz his audience about who they wanted killed and why—everyone from Saddam Hussein to a noisy milkman—

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then would launch into an impromptu routine, devising the most unlikely and absurd perfect murder to suit the case.

The attractive young woman sitting across from his table had seemed particularly fraught. He'd watched her sitting alone, laughing nervously, drinking just a little too quickly, a little too heavily, even for a student.

He struck up a conversation. She was lonely, needed to talk. After another couple of drinks she was explaining how much she hated her father, how the man had driven her mother to suicide because of his affair, how he'd not been concerned at his wife's death, had been in only too great a hurry to move his mistress into the house and marry her.

And Mossop had suggested that perhaps, if she could find a stranger with a mind to help, they might be able to put together a truly perfect murder, contrive a situation in which justice and retribution could be done.

Over the Festival month they'd laughed and joked about how her dad had an interest in a local garage and how the owner, who'd always fancied her, was facing bankruptcy, and she might be able to persuade him to help out by holding out the reward of financial favors . . . and allowing him to believe there might be a sexual incentive as well.

And suddenly, the surreal became reality. It took them months to contrive the situation and steel their courage to act. The girl's suggestion that a family friend in the police force should be installed as a witness was a stroke of genius. Finally, when all the pieces seemed to be in tune, they'd acted.

And it had worked. Beautifully. As elegantly as any piece composed by Pergolesi. The surprise on Carson's face as the practical joke became practicable homicide. The knife wound to Carson's heart had been obliterated by the shotgun blast. Carson's wrench retained enough forensic evidence to confirm it had been used on the Turnbulls, and his were the only prints found on it. The judge even complimented the deceptively strong Mossop on his courage, returning to tackle a much larger killer despite his own wound.

And Mossop should have been a happy man. He had wealth. Fame. He had the satisfaction of a masterful plan masterfully executed. He had the certainty that the courts had cleared him of any responsibility, that there were no loose ends, and that he and his fellow conspirator were wedded in the silence of mutual assured destruction: Neither could ever tell without condemning both.

So why was he disturbed? Because some two weeks ago he'd begun to worry that young Kirsty might want to remove him from the scene. Because two weeks ago, the dreams had started—terrible, vivid, chilling, remorseless dreams starring an assassin whose features he couldn't quite make out. ●

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THE BANSHEE

by Joyce Carol Oates

On Hedge Island, in Nantucket Sound, a twenty-minute ferry ride from Yarmouth Harbor, Massachusetts. On the promontory above the wide raked beach, the Hedge Island Yacht and Sailing Club. On another, matching spit of land to the east, the Hendricks' "cottage"—stately weathered-gray Victorian clapboard, three stories, numerous tall narrow windows, a tower and a widow's walk, steep shingleboard roofs and a wraparound veranda with a floor so shiny-gray it appeared lacquered. On the veranda, wicker furniture with bright chintz cushions. On the choppy waters of the Sound, sailboats looking like white paper cutouts.

In addition to being one of the world's best-known authors of serious or "literary" fiction, Joyce Carol Oates is an award-winning horror writer and an Edgar-nominated crime writer, and she's made it to the big screen and into the homes of TV viewers in each creative capacity. The adaptability of her unique way of seeing the world to film is evident in movies for TV and screen such as Lives of the Twins, Blonde, We Were the Mulvaneys, *and* Getting to Know You.

Cries of gulls. Mixed with the wind. And that flap-flapping sound overhead! Each time she glanced up fearful she would see giant birds flapping their wings as they swooped down upon her, but it turned out to be just the flag whipping in the wind at the top of the gunmetal pole.

The flag was Daddy's flag. But this summer Daddy was gone.

She wandered among the guests seeking Mummy. In her new coral-pink tank top and wraparound denim skirt with the big patch pocket in the shape of a kitten from Gap Kids. So many strangers! Mummy had so many friends. On the flagstone terrace, and around the swimming pool, and on the grassy lawn where the bar had been set up, even on the tennis courts. Bloody Marys and long-stemmed glasses of white wine, mushrooms stuffed with crab meat, Russian caviar smeared on dark bread like jelly, smoked salmon and thin-sliced cucumbers on Swedish crackers. Music booming so loud, almost you couldn't hear it. Women like Mummy in sleek swimsuit tops, silk slacks with pencil-thin legs. Bronze-

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skinned men in white trousers, sports shirts open to mid-chest. Men like Gerard, Mummy's new friend with a wide white smile that glistened. Oh here's a pretty girl! Here's the princess! Face like a flower! The strangers marveled but were soon bored with her. The Irish girl had brought Baby to Mummy who'd showed Baby to her friends, for a while Baby had stirred interest, but babies are even more boring than six-year-olds and soon the Irish girl was sent back up to the house for it was time for Baby's diaper change, Baby's bottle, and Baby's nap.

Oh, there was Mummy: that waterfall of straw-colored hair spilling on bronze-tanned bare shoulders. Laughter like glass breaking.

Mum-*my?* Plucking at Mummy's hand. Which Mummy did not like, not at such times. Mummy with Gerard in his dark glasses and windblown hair bleached from the sun, Gerard in white-dazzling sailing clothes and Mummy was wearing her "funky" top that was just a black silk scarf tied about her narrow chest and her wraparound silk skirt the color of neon strawberries. Bare-legged Mummy in high-heeled sandals that made her teeter. Mummy's fingernails were neon-strawberry too and perfect like plastic. Mummy slap-slapped at her as you'd brush away a pesky fly meaning go away! go back to the house! isn't that Irish girl supposed to be watching you! even as Mummy was laughing at Gerard telling one of his comical stories.

When she'd been a little girl Mummy had curled up to nap with her sometimes. It had not been that long ago on Hedge Island in the summer. In the big old iron bed in Mummy's and Daddy's room with the goose-feather pillows. Cuddled together in mid-afternoon which was a special time. Whispering and laughing and suddenly sleepy on the bed facing the window so you could see (through your eyelashes) the sky, and a little of the Sound. You could imagine sailing in the sky, in thin floating clouds. Now she was no longer little but six years old and soon to start first grade in the city and a new baby had come. She was given to know *There can be only one baby.* She had believed always that she was this baby but now Baby had come and so she could not be Baby. And yet when Mummy and Gerard went sailing they refused to take her with them, she was *too little.*

Too little, and it was dangerous. Gerard's route eastward between Monomoy Island and Nantucket Island and into the open Atlantic, doubling back then westward and circling all of Hedge Island to return in triumph to the Hendricks' dock.

She was running back to the house. Pushing through the legs. Oh she hated Mummy's friends even Gerard smiling at her pretending she was special!

She hated Daddy, for going away. For leaving Hedge Island. This is the safe place, Daddy used to say. Why'd Daddy say that if it

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wasn't true! And anyway it wasn't true, on Hedge Island there were summer squalls, there were hurricanes sometimes and howling winds and the dock had been torn up by ice (over the winter) and had had to be repaired. Daddy lived in the city now, but it was a different city. She'd been looking for Daddy hiding among the guests at the party for it was that kind of party, neighbors dropped by, summer guests and visitors to Hedge Island, the Yacht and Sailing Club people, so maybe Daddy had slipped among them, he'd changed how he looked, last time she'd seen Daddy he'd had scratchy black whiskers and a vertical line between his eyebrows she'd rubbed at with her fingers wanting to erase. Oh Dad-*dy.*

Daddy was not Baby's daddy (that was strange, but Mummy said) but Daddy was still her daddy (yes, Mummy said that was so) and that was why he might be at the party except—how could they find each other, in such a crowd?

If!—if she stood on the veranda!—on the wicker sofa on the veranda!—in her pretty new summer outfit from Gap Kids maybe Daddy would see her? But there were too many people on the veranda, too.

Inside the house the walls were blinding-white, there was a mirror over a chintz sofa that reflected more light that made your eyes hurt. She rubbed at her eyes. She was not crying! Panting like a little dog that has been kicked but she was not crying.

There was Baby in his downstairs crib. Upstairs in the nursery Baby had another crib. Both cribs were white.

Baby was a *little boy.* As she was a *little girl.* Mummy said oh she loved both! Mummy said she had not wished to stop with just one, and that one a *little girl.*

Mummy said when you're a mother you become superstitious you think what if? what if something happens to—? Oh it's the worst thought, it's the unthinkable thought so you start obsessing about more than one, a kind of disaster insurance, maybe it's just primitive instinct but we are primitive aren't we?

The Irish girl was laughing with the dark-tanned boy wearing a Red Sox cap. He was the son of one of Mummy's friends, he lived a few houses down on the beach. He'd brought a "joint" for the Irish girl and himself to smoke, they were laughing together as Baby lay in his crib by the French doors opening onto the veranda and the breezy salt air. Baby's eyelids fluttered as her shadow passed over his face.

Ba-*by?*

She knew to lilt her voice like Mummy's voice. Carefully she lifted Baby in her arms. Her little brother!—that is what he was. She was fascinated by Baby's eyes that were so small and blue and bright with moisture and always moving, trying to focus on her face. She liked to touch the smooth skin like a doll's rubber skin. And there was the small perfect mouth. Yet Baby had a tem-

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per: You could not believe the sounds that issued from that mouth. In the night, the Irish girl had to tend Baby if he woke, and would not sleep, and made his fierce choking noises. For sometimes Mummy was away. And sometimes Mummy was home, and with Gerard in the big bedroom and at such times she did not appreciate being wakened by the screams of a banshee.

What is a *banshee,* Mummy? she asked but Mummy seemed not to know, and was annoyed at her for asking. Gerard always knew what a word meant saying a *banshee* is some kind of Southwest Indian like Apache. But the Irish girl who kept to herself mostly and rarely said anything to Mummy except yes ma'am, no ma'am, thank you ma'am, now said in a thrilled voice Oh ma'am a *banshee* is a wild spirit sounding like the wind, it screams in the night in a household where someone is soon to die.

Mummy laughed. Like glass being broken. So you knew that Mummy was displeased. The Irish girl's pale-freckled face reddened and she said Oh ma'am! I am sorry.

Sometimes in the night this summer on Hedge Island which was a lonely summer she would slip from her bed in the room close-by the nursery and tiptoe barefoot and breathless into the nursery to peer into Baby's crib that was so white, it seemed to float in the shadows like a little boat in the water. When there was a moon, especially. When the moon was shining like a milky eye. When the Irish girl was snoring in her sleep. Like a ghost she would come to stand beside Baby's crib she had overheard Mummy saying had been her crib once upon a time and it was so strange to think that a long time ago she had been Baby, but now Baby was someone not-her she could look at as he slept. Baby slept so very hard, his small body quivered with the heat of his mysterious dreams. Oh, what was Baby dreaming? He was so small, he had not yet learned to speak. And so his baby-dreams were lost when he wakened.

It was so thrilling, she was holding Baby in her arms! And no one knew, and could scold.

She was holding Baby as the Irish girl held Baby snug in the crook of her left arm when she gave him his bottle. And her elbow lifted a little to support the nape of Baby's neck for they said that an infant's neck is not yet strong enough to support his head. Baby was not-asleep and not-awake. This was a good time for Baby for he was not likely to cry just now. How warm Baby was! Hedge Island was always cooled by sea breezes but Baby's body was hot from such hard sleeping. She liked it that Baby was trying to smile at her. His little snail mouth wet with spittle. For Baby knew her, and trusted her.

She had no trouble carrying Baby. Baby didn't weigh much more than her big ceramic antique doll, Grandma had given her. Past the doorway opening out onto the veranda and the noisy guests

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she carried Baby, and past the doorway leading to the pantry where the Irish girl and the boy in the Red Sox cap were standing very close together. Up the creaking stairs to the second floor. Along the corridor. Past doors opening upon sun-lit rooms. Past the nursery, and past the bedroom that had been Daddy's and Mummy's but was now Mummy's and Gerard's. And there was her own room with her little bed snug in a corner, her bedspread was snowy white ducks and kittens on a blue background like the sea. Her curtains matched the bedspread. On a little rocking chair, the big ceramic Victorian doll in what's called a pinafore. She carried Baby to the window seat where they could rest. She showed Baby the people below. The tennis courts, and the grassy lawn, and the terrace. Amid so many strangers she could not see Mummy, and she could not see Daddy. It was difficult to know if Baby was seeing what she pointed out to him. Baby gurgled, and wheezed, and made his little cooing noises, and squirmed, and one of his pudgy baby-hands touched her cheek. As if in gentle rebuke *We can't stop here, we are not high enough for them to see us.*

The tower! The widow's walk! She would carry Baby there.

It came to her so fast: like switching on TV with the remote.

But on the stairs to the third floor, that were so much narrower than the other stairs, and where the carpeting was worn almost through, she had to stop more than once, to lean Baby against the railing. Suddenly Baby was heavier, and warmer. A sweetish-sour smell from Baby's diaper. She was panting again, and her left arm was aching. Clumsily she shifted Baby to the crook of her right arm. Baby did not feel comfortable there for she had never before held Baby in the crook of her right arm and she had not seen the Irish girl hold Baby that way, and she did not think she'd seen Mummy hold Baby that way.

But it was all right, Baby surprised her by laughing!

Only once that summer had Mummy climbed with her to the tower, but Baby had not been with them. The higher we can climb the clearer our perspective, Mummy said. If we could fly to the moon and look back to earth we would "see" ourselves better. We would laugh at our so-called tragedies. From the widow's walk you could see farther inland, sand dunes and sand fences and wild rose briars twined about the fences. You could see out into Nantucket Sound where the waves were always choppy and dark blue, leaden blue, greeny-blue depending upon the sky. The gulls look free, see the gulls! Mummy said shading her eyes but gulls are creatures driven by hunger, every waking minute of their lives is a matter of hunger. If Mummy wanted her to feel sorry for the gulls, or to think that the gulls were silly, she could not know.

It was harder for her to remember the summer before when Daddy had taken her up into the tower. She tried very hard to remember Daddy climbing the third-floor stairs with her and

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hand-in-hand with Daddy the almost unbearable excitement of stepping through the door onto the roof where there was a platform protected by a railing: This was the "widow's walk." She'd been frightened at first but Daddy held her hand saying it was absolutely safe. Yes they were high-up and there was no roof here but they were not in any danger of falling. Many times she'd blinked her eyes startled at the bright blinding air that was so much windier up here than on the ground. The widow's walk was so exciting! Like flying in the eight-passenger plane to Hedge Island, from the Boston airport. Much more exciting than the ferry ride from Yarmouth Harbor that was so boring, you stayed inside your car and could hardly see the water.

She had to lean Baby against the wall, fumbling to open the door. She was panting hard now, her skin prickled with heat. It was hard to believe, Baby was so *heavy*. And Baby was beginning to fret as if impatient with her, wanting to get outside in the bright air and kicking his plump little legs in the way of a cat you've picked up to hug but the cat struggles and squirms trying to get away.

Baby, *no*.

Baby, see where we *are!*

Oh they were outside now, in the open air. Suddenly there was just the sky overhead. Blinding-bright windy air whipping her hair and clothes and making the flag, that was close-by and only a little higher than the roof of the house, flap like it was a live thing desperate to loosen itself from the gunmetal pole and fly off into the sky. Oh Baby, *see!*

By standing on her toes, and leaning over the railing, she could see some of the people on the ground below. But it was disappointing, she could not see them very well, and they could not see her. The railing was high as an adult's waist, and she was so much smaller. So she could not see anything very exciting except the sky, where a small propeller plane was passing by droning its motor like a hornet, and she could not be seen. And Baby could not be seen. Nobody below was noticing!

She would have to crawl through the railing out onto the roof, and bring Baby with her. She could do this, she thought. Last summer a crew of dark-skinned men had torn out old shingleboards and nailed new shingleboards onto the roof. Five or six men with hammers walking about the roof hunched over, sometimes squatting on their haunches, slip-siding, crawling, then again walking straight-up on the different sections of the roof. For there were steeper sections than others and the section beyond the widow's walk was not one of the steep ones.

So she laid Baby down on the floor of the widow's walk, and pushed her head through the railing, and squeezed the rest of her through like a cat. Now she was outside the railing, on the roof!—one leg on either side of the peak, to balance herself. This was

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more daring than a cat, this was a monkey! She was able to turn herself around saying aloud "Don't look down!" for this was what Mummy said in the rattly little plane as it circled to land at the Hedge Island airport with its single dirt runway fading out into a field of sand dunes and wild rose briars. Don't look down! she told herself sternly Baby don't look! as she reached through the railing for Baby who was oblivious of her command lying on his back flailing his arms and legs like a silly beetle, beginning to go red in the face with that look of baby-vexation that made you want to laugh sometimes it was so comical, other times you wanted to shake Baby quick, to prevent the banshee wail. Baby, *no.*

Because Baby was kicking it was difficult to pull him through the railing. The rungs were far enough apart but Baby was not cooperating. Oh, she was becoming impatient with Baby! For what if Daddy was here waiting to see them, Daddy was below at the edge of the noisy party, Daddy was about to glance up at the roof to see her and Baby—and there was no one visible, to be seen? And Daddy lost interest, and went away. And Mummy didn't see, either.

When Baby was new, and very little, she'd been jealous, maybe. The Irish girl had said Oh don't be jealous! You are the pretty one, you will always be the princess. And so she knew, what she was feeling was *jealous.* She'd been sulky, and sullen, and cried easily, and was mean to her doll, and hated Mummy. She'd cried for Mummy to take Baby back where she'd gotten him. (Why was that silly? Mummy was a shopper! Big packages tied with ribbon. Heavy glossy-paper bags, with plastic handles. Sometimes Mummy returned what she'd bought in the stores, why couldn't she take Baby back, too?) But Baby had not been taken back. Baby had stayed, and everyone adored Baby. And after a while she hadn't minded Baby so much being told he was her *little brother.* She had wanted a puppy but instead she had a *little brother.* Every time she peeked at him there were Baby's moist blue eyes fixed on her face. Oh, she had to laugh at Baby! Except sometimes she became confused and her thoughts hurt her head: She was Baby, and Baby was her? Was that how it was meant to be? Or had Baby come to take her place?

She had tried to ask Daddy this. If Baby was her, and had taken her place, where was *she?*

Daddy laughed as if she'd meant to be funny. Daddy kissed and hugged her but his whiskers scratched her.

She was on the roof, and Baby was with her. When Daddy saw he would be impressed. My little monkey! Daddy would tease.

This section of the roof was not so steep, or so high. There was another, higher roof with a steeper pitch where the brick chimney pushed through. If she could get to that roof! By sliding along this roof as long as she straddled the peak she would not lose her balance and as long as she didn't look down. She was grunting, carry-

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ing Baby in this new way. Bump-bumping Baby along. Baby did not like the bump-bumping and began to fret. His head was rolling back because the crook of her arm wasn't right. She could see how it wasn't right, but she could not correct it. And the sun was so strong, and blinding. And the wind from inland, from the west, miles away at the far end of the island where there was an enormous garbage dump and a frenzy of gulls and other scavenger birds and the wind blew these smells to the inhabitants of East Beach as it was called. And there were gulls here, too. Swift-darting shadows on the roof. The panicky thought came to her *They will peck out our eyes.* She would have to protect her eyes from the gulls yet she could not drop Baby!

Now she could hear the strangers' voices below, more clearly. Laughter, and loud thumping music like a heartbeat.

The gulls circled near as if curious, only just screamed at her and Baby and spun away on the wind. And Baby blinked at them gaping and his little snail-mouth was wet with spittle preparing to scream back at them but they were gone.

Oh, her bottom! Beneath her denim skirt she was wearing pink cotton panties. The shingleboards were rough and scratchy. Her bottom was tender, and beginning to hurt.

Like a swift hard slap from Mummy. From Gerard, too. Only what she deserved they said. A spoiled little girl always sulking!

Her arm was hurting, too. Where Baby flailed and kicked like a crazed cat, her arm was *so tired.*

Hush Baby! Hushaby Ba*by!*

By slow inches she was pushing her bottom along the peak of the roof. This wasn't so much fun as she had thought it would be. It was more like work, having to clean up something she'd spilled, or crawl beneath her bed to retrieve something she'd kicked there. No one had seen her yet. It was taking so long! Possibly she wasn't fully in sight yet, and had to go further. Her head felt strange. Like sharp-edged insects were inside buzzing to escape. *Don't look down* she told herself in Mummy's stern voice which was a voice to be obeyed but in the corners of her eyes she was beginning to see, she could not help herself. There was shouted laughter below, a blond blur that was (maybe) Mummy's hair, and so she looked, and gave a little scream of fear she was so high! She and Baby were so high above the ground! She was dizzy suddenly, and dry-mouthed paralyzed staring at the people below who had not yet seen her and Baby, Oh and Baby was kicking and fretting at such a bad time, so heavy in the crook of her arm, her heart beat hard in her ribcage she could not seem to catch her breath as if she'd been running biting her lip to keep from crying, Oh how many more minutes before one of them glanced up to see her and Baby and all their eyes flew open? ●

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KING AND QUEEN

an Interview with Stephen King

by Steve Steinbock

Steve Steinbock makes his home in Maine, where he conversed by phone with his state's most famous resident. Mr. Steinbock is a freelance writer, the author of three books about Judaism, and a frequent contributor to The Strand, Mystery Reader's Journal, and AudioFile Magazine.

EQMM: I'd like to get some of your thoughts about Ellery Queen. When we speak of Queen, we're referring to a magazine, an author, and a fictional detective.

KING: And a breakfast cereal!

EQMM: Not yet, but that's not a bad idea. Ellery Queen has come up in passing in a number of your books. What is it about Queen that makes him such an important icon for American detective fiction?

KING: Well, I read all of Ellery Queen's novels when I was a kid. And they were wonderful novels of deduction and they were wonderful pastimes. Wonderful puzzles and wonderful studies in character, and all of that. Wonderful examples of how to plot and misdirect and the whole nine yards. That's number one. Number two: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is just the best mystery magazine in the world, bar none. It always was. The only thing that ever compared with it—ever—was *Black Mask*. And that was before my time. For me, [*EQMM*] was a place where I sent my stories as a beginning writer, and I'd get the form rejections back and I'd grit my teeth and say, well, maybe next time.

EQMM: But you did sell a story to *EQMM*. Just as Mort Rainey—the character played by Johnny Depp in the film version of "Secret Window, Secret Garden"—had a story in a 1980 issue of *EQMM*, your story "The Wedding Gig" was published in 1980, in the December issue. Was anything else of yours published in *EQMM*?

KING: "The Wedding Gig" is the only story. I think they would probably publish more, if I had more in that genre. But "The Wedding Gig" was kind of a special story. It was written when I was in college, and then polished up for them later on. It was a young writer's best story. And it fit there in that magazine perfectly. It was a nice fit.

EQMM: You said you were a fan of the Queen novels. Do any particular titles stand out?

KING: I liked the Drury Lane books, actually. *The Tragedy of X, The Tragedy of Y, The Tragedy of Z,* and *Drury Lane's Last Case.* I enjoyed those a lot. But I read them all. I loved them all. *The Roman Hat Mystery*, and so on. They were terrific. Well written. Well plotted. I mean, like the magazine, those stories were miles

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and miles ahead of the competition at the time, the Erle Stanley Gardners and even the Agatha Christies.

EQMM: Any other recollections of Ellery Queen?

KING: Just a lot of pleasure from the books. And then moving over to the magazine because of the name recognition. And finding that the stories were generally very high quality. And finding writers there that I really loved. There were people like Ruth Rendell who became longtime favorites of mine.

EQMM: Who are some of your other favorites?

KING: Ellery Queen himself, for one. Cornell Woolrich, for another. A lot of those were reprints. But coming upon them was a real revelation. It made me look for the other ones. By the time I was reading them, Woolrich would have been tottering around on his last legs—or actually his last leg, he had gangrene in one of them. One name that comes to mind is Edward D. Hoch. He is always there. He's consistent, for sure.

EQMM: I'm thumbing through your story, "Secret Window, Secret Garden." When Mort Rainey looks at his issue of *EQMM*, the authors whose names are on the cover are Edward D. Hoch, Ruth Rendell, Ed McBain, Patricia Highsmith, and Lawrence Block.

KING: I probably found an issue. You know, I subscribed for many years, and I probably went downstairs to the library in our summer house, where I actually wrote that story, and we had one shelf that was just packed with *Ellery Queens*, and I probably just picked an issue at random and found a number of writers who were in that issue. Lawrence Block is a great one, by the way. . . . You haven't seen the movie, have you?

EQMM: No.

KING: I have. And one of the things the movie doesn't address—I know that it troubled me when I was writing the story. The story that Mort Rainey is working on, that is the issue of the whole thing. I think Mort Rainey's version of it is called "Sowing Season," and it's been published in a book called *Everybody Drops the Dime.* And as any writer will tell you, in a book like that, if you turn to the front or the back, you're gonna find a page where everything is listed—you know, where it was originally published and when. I can't remember how I handled that, but they didn't even handle it at all, they don't even touch it in the movie. You see him thumb through the front of the book, and there's a page at the front with the title, and then there's the contents page and there's the first story, and then he turns to the story. But the way that *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is handled in the film is exactly the way that it's handled in the story. That is, he gets it FedEx at the Post Office, and the lady says, "The post office would have a cow if they knew we handle that Federal Express man's mail. . . . You won't tell them, will you?" and he says, "No way," and she says, "Good. Because I saw what you did," which is my favorite line in the whole story. And he says, "Pardon me?" and she says, "I said they'd shoot me if you did." ●

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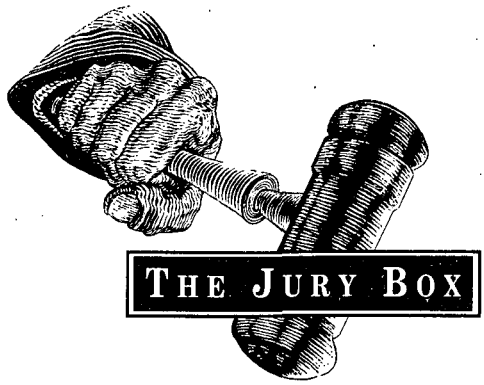

by Jon L. Breen

One of my favorite mysteries of the 1970s was James Anderson's *The Affair of the Blood-Stained Egg Cosy,* published in Great Britain in 1975 and in the U.S. in 1977. Both it and its successor *The Affair of the Mutilated Mink Coat* (1981) struck me as perfectly balanced combinations of good-natured parody of the classical 1930s detective novel and genuine Golden Age-style puzzle plotting, but I've often wondered in the years since if I overrated them. With the unexpected appearance of a third title in the series these many years later, I'm confident I did not.

**** James Anderson: *The Affair of the 39 Cufflinks,* Poisoned Pen, $24.95. When the reading of a nonagenarian variety artist's will comes to Alderley with an accompanying group of distant relatives, Lord Burford's delightful but cursed stately home again becomes the scene for murder, and his bright-young-thing daughter Gerry again vies with Chief Inspector Wilkins for Great Detective honors. No one has ever approximated the style, milieu, sound plot carpentry, and unfettered ingenuity of the '30s product better than Anderson, who even manages to avoid the mid-novel sag that is one of the biggest pitfalls of this sort of book.

**** Dean Koontz: *Odd Thomas,* Bantam, $26.95. The title character, who tells his own very dark story in determinedly light and humorous fashion, is a 20-year-old fry cook in a small California desert town. His greatest professional ambition is to move on to selling tires or shoes, but his true calling is as a psychic sleuth, who sees dead people (including an oddly displaced Elvis) and helps law enforcement identify and catch heinous killers. To accommodate his gift and stave off madness, he must avoid large cities where the volume of evil living and troubled dead would be overwhelming. This is extraordinary storytelling, highly recommended

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to readers who don't mind more than a touch of the supernatural and can forgive the author for giving away on page 3 the solution of a classic detective novel.

*** Lindsey Davis: *The Accusers,* Mysterious, $25. First-century informer (i.e., private eye) Marcus Didius Falco has returned from Britain to Rome, where he belongs. His latest case finds him in top form, investigating the death of a senator that may have been suicide (for protection of his heirs) or, much more likely, murder by a family member. In the Roman equivalent of a Big Trial novel, Falco works with the defense on behalf of the accused son. The method of saving your client if you're a Roman advocate is to accuse and try somebody else first. Along with the fascinating legal procedures are such cultural sidelights as the role of the funeral clown.

*** Barbara and Max Allan Collins: *Bombshell,* Five Star, $25.95. Expanding on Barbara Collins's 1997 short story "Dasvidaniya, Krushchev," the authors imagine an encounter between the Soviet leader and Marilyn Monroe during Krushchev's visit to Hollywood in 1959. Though their downsides are not ignored, both main characters are treated sympathetically and believably, as is Walt Disney in a supporting role. Although the assassination plot is presumably fictional, the historical details are accurate. Appearing on the periphery is Los Angeles Mayor Norris Poulson, one of the most embarrassing politicians in California history—and you can imagine what a tough field that is.

*** Ed Gorman: *Breaking Up Is Hard to Do,* Carroll & Graf, $24. Chairman Krushchev also figures, albeit indirectly, in the sixth novel about Iowa lawyer and private eye Sam McCain, set at the time of the October, 1962, Cuban Missile Crisis. The immediate problem in Black River Falls involves a beautiful corpse found in a politician's newly completed luxury bomb shelter. The gradually unfolding plot, on-target details of time and place, and occasional plugs for writers of the time (Charles Williams, Fredric Brown, Budd Schulberg) are all par for the series. (Attention McCain Irregulars: Don't bother trying to figure out exactly when Sam was born—the math does not compute.)

*** DeLoris Stanton Forbes: *The Perils of Marie Louise,* Five Star, $25.95. Marie Louise DelOrio narrates the saga of the wealthy and tradition-bound Snodgrass family, of whom she is her generation's only female offspring. The story, never too specific on dates, ranges over many decades and makes for compelling reading, though you may wonder how the account of her eventful, privileged, but sometimes seemingly cursed life can be resolved satisfactorily. Forbes, one of the most consistently inventive and unconventional of crime writ-

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ers, manages the trick.

*** Alice Blanchard: *The Breathtaker,* Warner, $24.95. Fans of that great action movie *Twister* are bound to enjoy small-town Oklahoma police chief Charlie Grover's search for a serial killer among the storm chasers. Once the surprising villain is revealed, the story follows an excessively predictable path, but the writing and background are first-rate.

** Joan Coggin: *The Mystery at Orchard House,* Rue Morgue, $14.95. First published in Britain in 1946 but set in the period before World War II, this is the second of four humorous mysteries featuring Lady Lupin, the deceptively Gracie Allen-ish wife of an English vicar. Here she visits a friend's bed-and-breakfast, ostensibly to recuperate from the flu, and encounters a series of puzzling thefts but (as the juvenile-sounding title hints) no murder. The not-quite-Wodehousian Coggin is another discovery of Rue Morgue publishers Tom and Enid Schantz, who also offer first American editions of the first and third in the series, with the fourth to come.

Those of us who regret the lack of respect paid the great American writers of classical detective fiction will be delighted at the latest addition to a prestigious literary reprint series: Jacques Futrelle, author of the classic "The Problem of Cell 13," whose place in mystery history would be even greater had he not died in the sinking of the *Titanic* at age 37. His stories are packed with inexplicable events, elucidated by the irascible scientific sleuth Augustus S.F.X. Van Dusen, often keying on the technological wonders of the early 20th century. Of the 21 stories in *Jacques Futrelle's "The Thinking Machine"* (Modern Library, $14.95), edited and introduced by Harlan Ellison, no fewer than seven appear in neither of the two Futrelle collections E.F. Bleiler edited for Dover in the early 1970s. Ellison's introduction is typically lively, entertaining, and unconventional. My only mild complaint: No original publication information is provided. Though I haven't examined it, the serious Futrelle collector should be aware of *The Thinking Machine Omnibus* (The Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, Box 204, Sherburne, Ontario, Canada, L0N 1S0; $50), purporting to offer all the known stories in the series (around 50, some first published in newspapers and unreprinted since), with original publication data.

Too many past best-novel Edgar winners are out of print and difficult to find. In the first of a new series designed to rectify the problem, the winner for best of 1967 is again available. Donald E. Westlake's *God Save the Mark* (Forge, $24.95 hardcover, $14.95 trade paper), chosen and introduced by series editor Otto Penzler, is a splendid early example of his unique brand of criminous comedy.

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Art by Ron Bucalo

The Shooting of John Roy Worth

by Stuart M. Kaminsky

And a hard-drinking woman or a slow-thinking man will be the death of me yet.

—"Hard-Drinking Woman" by John Roy Worth

Wally Czerbiak was sane. At least he was as sane as Monty Vitalle, who stood behind the second of three chairs at The Clean Cut barbershop, five dollars for a haircut, three barbers, no waiting. But sometimes there were only two barbers. Sometimes only one. Actually, there was usually only one, Monty. It didn't matter. There was never much of a wait, if any, at The Clean Cut.

Wally listened to Monty talk as Monty cut his hair. Monty was a throwback. He had seen barbers in movies, old movies where the

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barber just talks and talks. That was a major reason Monty had become a barber. He liked to talk about anything. Baseball, the market, the latest gossip about drug abuse by some million-million dollar basketball player, Rhoda Brian's stomach stapling.

Wally just sat and listened. Songs ran through his head, background music that fit the scene. For Wally, the major factor in his becoming a sign painter was that his father was a sign painter till arthritis crippled him and he turned over his brushes and paints to Wally. Wally had a natural talent, and it was easier to just paint signs than do what was necessary to become a doctor or something. The fact was that Wally couldn't think fast on his feet. School had always been a puzzle he couldn't solve, a game whose rules he could never learn.

Stuart Kaminsky's relationship with the movie and TV business is more multifaceted than that of any other writer in this issue. He writes about Hollywood in his Toby Peters novels; he's a professor of film studies; two of his novels, *When the Dark Man Calls* and *Hidden Fears*, have been made into motion pictures (the former becoming two movies —one American, one French); he's the editor of the anthology *Show Business Is Murder*; and he's a scriptwriter for movies and TV who created an episode for A&E's *Nero Wolfe*, in which none other than *Secret Window* star Timothy Hutton featured. ¶

Besides, Wally was proud of some of his work, the real challenges, like the sign he did a few months ago, black letters on yellow, Old English: PIECE OF CAKE, with a picture Wally drew of a cake with white icing in a flowing, delicate pattern.

The cake was vanilla with cherries inside. You couldn't tell that by looking at the sign, but Wally knew it. It was important to him to know things like that so he could make the cake look real. Without knowing what was inside, it was just a hollow shell.

Sometimes Wally felt like a hollow shell. When that happened, he quickly filled the shell with food. He was thinking of a Big Mac while Monty kept talking. He was thinking of a Big Mac and how he would kill John Roy Worth.

"You understand?" Monty said.

Monty looked like a twig, a bald twig with wide brown suspenders. Monty had blue eyes and peppermint breath. He popped Certs like Wally's cousin Kenneth had popped uppers back in the 'eighties, when they were kids.

"Yes," said Wally, looking at himself in the mirror, watching the hair fall in ringlets as Monty cut and talked, narrow knobby shoulders huddled holding today's suspenders. The Clean Cut was old,

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ceiling a patterned tin, floor white tile with cracks that ran like meandering rivers, walls covered in paper with repeating pictures of ancient airplanes. Monty was alone today. The other barber chairs sat empty, and only Mr. Rosenberg, who lived in the Garden Gables Assisted Living facility, sat waiting. Mr. Rosenberg had been driven by the bus from the Garden Gables. It would be back for him in an hour. Mr. Rosenberg didn't care if it was five hours. He liked the smell of the barbershop. He liked fingering the curled edges of the magazines that flopped on the small table next to him. He liked listening to Monty and throwing in an observation when he could.

"So, it's a miracle," Monty said. "All this."

He paused to wave his comb and point it around the shop. Wally could see him in the mirror.

"You gotta think about it, Wally," he went on. "People were on the earth with nothing, nothing at all, no thing at all. Just people and the earth and the animals and whatever was growing. And they made from it houses and cars and computers and cake mixers."

"And streets and telephones and airplanes," said Mr. Rosenberg.

"I'm going to shoot someone today," said Wally softly, looking at the elegant letters painted on the window more than forty years ago by his father saying this, indeed, was The Clean Cut Barbershop.

"That a fact?" said Monty. "Something eating you?"

"No, nothing special. It's just the day I'm going to shoot someone," said Wally again, very softly, calmly, looking in the mirror to be sure Monty was cutting his hair just the way he liked it, not too short. Too short and his face looked like a balloon, like John Candy.

"You got to kill somebody, kill Dwight Spenser," said Mr. Rosenberg. "No loss there. You gotta kill somebody, kill Spenser, get it out of your system, rid the world of an anti-Semite."

"I don't know Spenser," said Wally.

"Room next to mine," said Rosenberg. "Must be a hundred years old. God's keeping him alive to punish those around him who've screwed up their lives. I'm eighty-six. He'll outlive me. The bad die ancient. You know what I'm saying?"

"I know what you're saying," said Wally. "But I've got to kill someone important."

"Like who?" asked Rosenberg. "Who's important in Bardo?"

"John Roy Worth," said Wally.

"And that's who?" asked Rosenberg.

"Country singer," said Monty dreamily, still thinking about the miracle of the world, the wonders of a comb, the marvel of the scissors in his hand. "Born and grew up right here in Bardo. Mother

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and father still here. Won the Grammy last year for singing something about dirty women. He in town?"

" 'Hard-Drinking Woman,' " Wally said. "Youngest country-and-western singer to win a Grammy. Yes, he's in town."

"Done," said Monty, sweeping the sheet out from under Wally's chin so that the hairs on it floated neatly to the floor like snowfall in a glass bulb. Monty twirled the sheet like a toreador and laid it neatly in one movement on the empty barber chair next to him. It was Monty's trademark. That little move.

Wally got out of the chair. He always gave Monty a dollar tip. Monty always said, "Thank you kindly, Mr. Czerbiak, sir."

He did this time, too. Rosenberg had put down the magazine and was walking slowly, stoop-shouldered, toward the chair. He looked like a gnome with a secret. Rosenberg had perfected the knowing look to hide his basic lack of intelligence.

Such, thought Wally, is the way of the world.

"You got a gun?" asked Monty, wrapping the cloth around Rosenberg's wrinkled neck.

"Yeah," said Wally as he went out the door and onto Fourth Street. The gun in his pocket belonged to his father. Kept it loaded in a drawer in the shop.

And this is what John Roy Worth was doing in Bardo, Texas. He was visiting his father and mother. He came back when he was in the area. He brought them something they didn't need or want whenever he made his brief visits. John Roy's mother and father always acted pleased to get the modern-looking lamp or new television to replace their new television. John Roy never stayed long, an hour or two at the most. He was always in a hurry, had someplace to go. John Roy's mother had come to expect this.

"Go, Johnny," she would say. "I know you're busy. We're proud of you."

"Very proud," John Roy's father Lee would say with a smile he didn't mean, happy that his son who had dyed his hair and wore an earring and a cowboy hat would be out of his life. Lee was a cop, retired. Sheriff's office. He couldn't carry a tune. Neither could his wife, and Lee didn't think their son John Roy did an awful goddamn good job of it, either. Besides, Lee could tell from his breath that John Roy had been smoking. The smell was also on his son's clothes. He was glad when John Roy, named for his mother's father, was gone, back on the television and the radio and the tapes, where he could be turned off.

It was toward the apartment of Mr. and Mrs. Lee Worth that Wally, clean-shaven, freshly cut hair, determined look on his face, headed. He walked. He could have taken his car. He had a 1997 Geo Prizm. It was blue. He kept it in good condition, but didn't have much of anywhere to drive it.

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He didn't need his car. Not today. He was going to shoot John Roy Worth with the gun in his pocket and then wait for the police. There might be someone with John Roy. He would shoot him or her or them, too. He might have to shoot John Roy three or four or more times. There were enough bullets in the gun. He wanted to be sure. He didn't want to be the man who tried to kill the sort-of-famous John Roy Worth. He wanted to be the man who killed the celebrity.

He walked. Nice sunny day. Slight breeze. Crows cawing somewhere but he couldn't see them. The streets were almost empty. He was just turning into the driveway of the Fair Breeze Condos on Second Street. A lady came out of the doorway putting on white gloves as she walked toward him with a smile. She was a friend of Wally's mother. Her name was Stella Armstrong.

"Wally," she said.

"Mrs. Armstrong."

"You visiting someone?"

"No," he said. "I'm here to shoot John Roy Worth."

Mrs. Armstrong thought Wally meant he was going to take the singer's photograph. He wasn't carrying a camera, but they were so small nowadays that you could carry one in your pocket. Wally was a painter, not a photographer, but maybe, Mrs. Armstrong thought, he took photographs and then went back and painted pictures from them—not that she recalled any paintings of real people Wally had ever done.

"Got to get to an appointment with my doctor," she said apologetically. "I've got a thing on my back. Down here, you see? My best to your mother."

Wally nodded and smiled at her as she passed him. She smelled like lilacs.

Now, if someone were to ask Wally why he wanted to kill John Roy Worth, he would have had an answer. He would have had a different answer for whoever asked the question. He had a list of answers in his head depending on the questioner and when they asked him. He wondered what, if anything, he would tell the police. He was curious about how the system would work once he was under arrest. He looked forward to being questioned, talking to a lawyer, getting a uniform, lying on a cell cot, going to trial. He would definitely plead "not guilty." No plea-bargaining. What was the point in plea-bargaining when part of the point was seeing himself on trial?

He tried to hum "Hard-Drinking Woman" as he nodded at Richie Stawn, who manned the desk, wore a uniform, and was responsible for security. Richie liked his uniform, his job. Gave him plenty of time to write poetry. He had given a lot of it to John Roy Worth when the famous singer came to see his parents in Apartment 4G.

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John Roy had always taken the ring binder filled with what Richie was certain, or at least hoped, were lyrics for a big hit.

"Who you going to see, Wally?" Richie asked.

"Going to shoot John Roy Worth."

"Little camera?"

"Yes," said Wally, thinking only now that he should have brought a camera or something. He had not considered the possibility that people would think what he meant by shooting was something quite different.

Richie had been three years ahead of Wally at Lyndon Johnson High. They hadn't been friends. They hadn't been enemies. All they shared was the fact that neither participated in anything at school. Not football, baseball, basketball, wrestling, the photo club, the collectors club, the herpetology club, the Young Republicans, nothing. Wally had painted all the signs for school dances, elections, meetings, none of which he attended. Everything he had created had been thrown away or washed away by wind, rain, and time. All these years since he barely graduated, Wally had continued to do the signs for Homecomings, graduation, the town's annual Founder's Day, the Prairie Flower Festival.

Reasons, Wally thought as he waited for the elevator, reasons he could have given had he been asked about what he planned to do in a few minutes:

John Roy Worth had been against the war with Iraq. He was unpatriotic.

John Roy Worth had done nothing for the very town in which he was born.

John Roy Worth took the Lord's name in vain in his songs.

John Roy Worth fornicated.

John Roy Worth was planning something big and evil. Wally wasn't sure what it was, but it was clearly spelled out in his songs.

John Roy Worth had one of those smug I'm-a-star faces that let you know he thought you were a dust mite and he knew something funny and embarrassing about you.

John Roy Worth's death would make Wally famous for a little while. He'd be interviewed by Diane Sawyer just before the weather on *Good Morning America.*

John Roy Worth's death would put Wally in prison forever and he'd never have to make another decision again about much of anything. Maybe they'd let him paint signs till the arthritis got him the way it had gotten his father. Did they need someone to paint signs in prison?

These were all reasons he might give. One or two of them might even be right, or maybe not.

"Worth's expecting you, Wally?" asked Richie.

"No."

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"Gotta call them up, then," he said with a deep sigh, as if the sigh were a major task.

The elevator doors opened while Richie was dialing. Out stepped John Roy Worth. He was wearing a cowboy hat, nice tan one with a black band and a tiny feather. His face was shaved clean, a concession to his parents, because when he did his videos or TV appearances John Roy always looked like he needed a shave.

He was also wearing clean, new-looking jeans and a Dallas Cowboys shirt, not the tee kind but a white one with a collar and just a little Dallas Cowboys insignia on the pocket.

He was smoking, looked deep in thought, didn't see Richie or Wally. He walked past them toward the door.

"Mr. Worth," Richie called.

John Roy paused and turned, his mind still somewhere, maybe upstairs with his parents, maybe in some studio in Nashville or in bed with some girl. He looked at Richie.

"Wally wants to shoot you," Richie said. "That all right?"

John Roy Worth looked at Wally, head to foot, maybe recognizing something.

"Shoot me?"

"Picture, photograph, you know," Richie explained.

Wally's hand was in his pocket. The gun felt surprisingly warm. He imagined, tasted gun metal in his mouth, on his tongue.

"Wally Czerbiak?" asked John Roy, taking a step toward Wally.

Wally nodded.

"You painted the horse on the sidewalk in front of Lyndon Johnson High for the Homecoming when I graduated."

"Yeah," said Wally.

John Roy smiled. "Great horse. Forgot about that till just now. Funny how you forget things and they just come back."

"I've got a poem about a horse," Richie lied. "I can get it to you at the hotel before you leave."

John Roy wasn't listening.

"You still painting?" John Roy asked, taking a deep drag on his cigarette.

"Signs," said Wally.

"That horse," John Roy said, looking up at the ceiling, maybe trying to see the horse. "All white and wide-eyed. It had wings or a horn on its head or something."

"Both," said Wally. "A flying unicorn."

"Flying unicorn," John Roy repeated almost to himself.

"Well, I'll be damned," Richie lied again. "My poem is about a white flying unicorn."

"It'd make a good album cover," John Roy said, looking at Wally. "I could write a song about Homecoming, that horse, Connie Appleton, but I wouldn't use her name. You know."

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Richie sighed. He wasn't getting through. He knew it. He was doomed to his uniform.

"You got a card?" John Roy asked.

"No," said Wally.

"Well, you can write your name and number down for me and I'll have someone call you."

"You'd forget," said Wally. "You'd shove it in your pocket and forget and five months from now you'd forget why you wrote my name and number and throw it away."

John Roy adjusted his cowboy hat and grinned.

"You may be right, but don't count on it. You want to take my picture?"

"No," said Wally, taking the gun out of his pocket and aiming it at the singer.

"Wally," Richie cried out from behind the desk.

John Roy Worth looked at the gun and lost his grin.

"Hold it, Wally. I've got about five hundred dollars in my wallet. I'll just pull it out and hand it over. Put the gun away and we'll call it a loan, no, a first payment for the flying-horse album cover."

"Not about money," said Wally. "I've got eleven thousand, four hundred and six dollars in savings at First Farmers."

"I do something to you?" asked John Roy. "I mean, you got a grudge, something? I knock up your sister or cousin or something, insult you or your family? Hell, I was a kid."

"You're everybody," Wally said as John Roy started to raise his arms though no one had asked him to.

John Roy glanced at Richie for help. Richie had none.

The idea had just come to Wally. Right out of the blue nowhere. John Roy Worth was everybody. John Roy Worth wasn't just a country singer who used to live in Bardo, Texas. John Roy was Texas, was the United States, was the world. The world had no meaning. That's what had started Wally down this gun-weighted road. It was all made up. All a story people told each other to make them forget they were going to die and the world was going to blow up or blow away or freeze or burn someday.

Maybe Monty had said something like this once and the idea had just slept all curled up inside him and woke up just now wondering what was going on.

Wally was going to be a shooting star. He was going to be a bright light for a few seconds. He was going to shoot a star. He was going to be a star. It was that or just keep painting signs till his fingers got too much arthritis like his father's had and then he'd live alone in the house and watch television with his mother and father and eat cereal with freeze-dried fruit in it that got soggy when you added milk.

Richie said, "Wally, no."

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Wally pulled the trigger. He was no more than a dozen feet from John Roy Worth, but he had never fired a gun before and missed, shattering the window behind the man who had written and sung "Hard-Drinking Woman."

Then, in that little snip of an instant that hardly covered any real time and seemed like a dream, Wally saw the young cowboy drop to the floor and pull something out of his pocket.

Wally was going to fire again. Maybe he did. He didn't remember. The thump on his chest like someone jabbing him to make a point pushed him back a step. Then something stuck in his throat the way a big vitamin pill did sometimes. He dropped to his knees and felt like coughing and sneezing at the same time. And then Wally fell forward on his face into shattered glass from the window.

The gun was no longer in his hand. Nothing was in his hand. His head was to his left side. He could see shards and bits of glass forming some kind of figure. He imagined chance or God or his own imagination was starting to make a stained-glass window. A flying white horse?

Someone turned him over. He looked up at John Roy Worth, who held a little gun in his hand. John Roy was shouting, "Call the police!"

Wally wanted to talk but words wouldn't come.

"You crazy son of a bitch," John Roy said.

Somewhere far away, maybe as far as Houston, Richie was talking to someone on the phone.

"Hero," Wally gasped, and choked.

John Roy brushed some shards of glass from Wally's face.

"You're no hero," said John Roy. "Just be quiet. Police are coming."

"No," said Wally. "You. You're the hero. Shot it out with a crazy sign painter. Beat him to the draw. All over the news. That gun registered?"

John Roy nodded and tilted his cowboy hat back like Roy Rogers or James Garner.

Wally wanted to say something else. He wasn't sure what it was, but it didn't matter because he could no longer speak. He closed his eyes. John Roy lifted Wally's head and Wally suddenly, vividly saw the flying white unicorn and John Roy Worth astride it, cowboy hat in one hand, horse bucking in the clouds.

Someone was breathing into his mouth. John Roy was trying to keep him alive. Hero.

It was then that Wally Czerbiak decided not to die. And he didn't. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

SLOWSAND

by Brian Muir

Raised in Oregon, Brian Muir has lived in L.A. for the past two decades, employed in the movie business. His jobs have included production assistant, assistant director, editor, special effects technician, actor, and writer. He was the writer of the film *Critters* (New Line Cinema), and most recently has worked on rewrites and English-language adaptations of Hong Kong action movies.

The young woman with the painted blue eyes and scarlet lips was going under for the third time. The pool of quicksand was on a cheap jungle set with green plastic fronds, rubber vines, and a nondescript backdrop that faded to shadow. The picture on the DVD was clear and crisp, clear enough to see every spot on the girl's tattered leopard-print bikini top as she struggled against the viscous quicksand that looked more like overcooked oatmeal.

She made a real performance out of it, too, dipping under the goop for a long stretch, then reemerging to take a deep breath. Then under she would go again before bursting above the surface for another grateful suck of air. But when she went under for the third time, she didn't come back up. The camera stayed on the quicksand until the slow ripples ceased and the glop was still.

The set was phony and the quicksand was fake, but the girl was dead. That much was real.

The message had come to me through one of a number of ways that I can get messages. Ann Dexter at the women's shelter on Powell had gotten word from a cousin of a friend of one of the battered wives hiding out under Ann's watchful eye. That's how it always works. A to C to F. That's the way I like it. A's to B's always make me nervous. Ann had had the message for three days by the time I stopped by.

"This came for you," she said.

I opened the slip of paper and read the words. Only a name and address. *Karla Brewer, 488 S.E. 93rd.* It was almost always a woman asking for help. I'd helped men, too, in the past, but they rarely ever asked for it. Something ingrained in their macho psyches

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that prevented them from asking a woman for help, I suppose. But it happened on occasion. Desperate people do crazy things sometimes.

"Why don't you get a phone?" asked Ann. "You'd get your messages sooner."

"You know better than that," I said, then took off.

Karla Brewer kept a nice home. It was a modest two-bedroom affair with thick carpeting and a spacious kitchen. Her husband was a high-school vice-principal. I visited her while he was at work. I knew she'd prefer it that way.

She fixed us coffee and we sat in the living room to talk things over. There were children's toys strewn across the floor, and one of her kids, a three-year-old boy, was racing around the house making a horrible racket. No matter how often she told him to take a time-out, and it was often, it didn't register with the kid. Her other child was not much more than a baby, a little girl in a pink jumpsuit. She just sat in her highchair and stared at me with her big blue eyes the whole time I was there, not making a peep. I liked her.

"This is Mandi at her graduation." Karla was showing me pictures of her sister. Her only sibling, her closest friend, now merely another statistic. Another soldier lost in the war for fame being fought far south of here under the big bad Hollywood sign.

Karla wiped another tear away, no doubt remembering some of the good times as she gazed at a picture of Mandi, a little girl in a swimming pool with an inflatable duck around her tiny waist.

After we talked for about a half-hour, Karla put the baby down for a nap and somehow managed to get her bratty boy into his room, but not without significant caterwauling. Then she shoved the DVD into the player. The machine swallowed the disc with a mild whirr, showing us the last images of Mandi. The ones of her drowning in the phony quicksand. Karla stared at the screen with watery eyes. I don't know how she did it. Watching her little sister die like that. Maybe it was the only way she could convince herself it was true.

"The police said it was an accident, but that pool wasn't deep at all." Karla wiped a tear away, defiant.

"What do you think it was?"

"It was those sleazebags. The ones that made her do this. She was trying to be an actress." Karla spit out the words.

I'd seen tapes and DVDs like this before, fetish things for guys with a kink in their systems, a flaw in their synapses. Something to do the trick for them when normal homegrown porn wasn't good enough. There was no nudity on these tapes and no sex, just a pretty young girl in fake quicksand, pretending to drown. The idea was for her to stay under as long as possible, then come back up at the last moment. The guys got off on that, the image of a woman struggling to breathe. It was some offshoot of autoerotic asphyxiation. Only a shrink with a lot of framed sheepskin on his walls could even begin to explain it. There were a lot of sick pup-

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pies out there.

"Maybe it was just an accident, Karla. It's clear from the picture that no one held her under."

"The autopsy found traces of cocaine and Valium in her system. Mandi never touched drugs."

I didn't want to bring up the fact that her sister had been away for nearly a year and Hollywood will do things to even the purest of hearts.

"Please," said Karla. "You've got to find out . . . I need to know who gave Mandi those drugs and I need to know why she died."

Deep down inside I figured the police were probably right and Mandi's death was nothing more than a tragic accident. But Karla had a feeling about it that seemed to go deeper than her grief, something that touched on intuition, and a woman's intuition was something I always trusted. Besides, this would give me a chance to shake down the creeps who were putting out these DVDs.

Karla gave me the disc and I got up to leave.

"How much is this going to cost me?" Her eyes pleaded. I knew she and her husband didn't have a lot of money, what with a vice-principal's income and two ravenous little mouths to feed. I also knew she wanted to keep it from her husband.

"Don't worry," I told her. "We'll work something out."

I'd been to Hollywood a few times before, only for business, never pleasure. The soul of the city had a hole in it somewhere, making it a hard place to find true pleasure. Sort of like trying to get a decent rubdown from a one-armed masseuse.

Finding the joint that burned copies of the DVD was easy enough, a tiny brick building tucked on a nondescript block near Cahuenga and Santa Monica Boulevard, an area popular with johns looking for streetwalkers of dubious gender.

The young guy running the place remembered well enough the client that brought the "movie" in for duplication, but he was not at liberty to divulge that type of information, spewing some weak rhetoric about the privacy of his customers. But I had a tool I used in situations like this. Some would call it a weapon. It really was nothing more than a coquettish twinkle in my eye, but I knew how to use it. It worked very well on men and sometimes on women, though the latter were a trickier lot.

Ten minutes later I walked out of there with a San Fernando Valley address in my pocket and the young proprietor was left with the memory of one of my very best smiles. I delivered it straight from the hip, along with a careful lean across the counter that let my abundant particulars shift and heave just so. He'd be thinking about that smile when he was with his girlfriend later, or by himself in the shower. I didn't mind men thinking about me that way. It was harmless, really, and kind of flattering. As long as they didn't picture me in a pool of fake quicksand.

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The address in the Valley was on another nondescript block, this one off Ventura Boulevard along a row of facades housing various clothing boutiques and beauty salons. There were a few trees struggling to survive along the sidewalk, as if the snooty residents were allowing nature a lease on life, renewable monthly.

The number corresponded to a room over a wig shop, so I shuffled upstairs and gave a knock. After no answer I tried the knob. It was locked but I thought I could hear someone inside. It had been awhile since I'd picked a lock, but I still had the touch.

The reception area was nothing but an empty desk and a vinyl couch for guests. There was a colorful advertisement hanging crookedly on the wall. It showed a buxom lady surrounded by balloons. She was squeezing one in her hands, ready to pop it. Another weird fetish. A sheet of black cloth hung in the doorway. I went through it.

In the rear was a photography studio with a few lights and a colored backdrop. Intensely working a digital camera on a tripod was a young guy with dark curly hair and yellow-tinted glasses he no doubt thought were stylish. He was focusing on a woman in a red dress, a fortyish matronly sort with a lot of mileage to her but the legs of a twenty-five-year-old strapped into a sleek pair of fire engine-red stiletto heels. She had one foot raised, waiting for her cue to stomp on a cute little bunny rabbit, obliviously munching a leaf of lettuce. It looked like I was just in time for the fun.

"I think the correct phrase is 'Cut,'" I said.

The woman slowly lowered her foot without touching the rabbit, looking apprehensive. The guy whirled around like Cecil B. DeMille confronting a studio executive who'd just wandered onto his closed set. When he saw it was only little ol' me, he took on the smug air of someone who thinks he's got the upper hand. Men are experts with that look.

"I know you're not a cop 'cause I don't see a warrant."

"ASPCA." I pulled aside my coat and a shiver ran through him. A flash of silver-plated .45 will do that to someone.

I directed my gaze at the startled woman. "Get your gear and go back to your day job, darling."

She slipped her feet into some manageable pumps, grabbed her bag, and was out of there in under sixty seconds. She wasn't as quick as she looked.

"You weren't really going to do to that rabbit what I think you were going to do to that rabbit, were you?"

The visionary director regarded me with his beady eyes, amber behind the frames. "What do you want? Now that you've blown a day's worth of work. You know how much I'm spending on this shoot?"

I looked around the meager facilities. "I'm sure your budget will make headlines in *Variety.*" At his surly gaze I pulled a photo from

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inside my coat. "Take a look, Mr. Hitchcock. Tell me what you see."

It was Mandi's head shot. He glanced at it and his gaze became surlier, if that was possible.

"I've already been over all that with the cops."

"Sing it again, pretty boy."

He gave me the details. Mandi had come to him three months ago, desperate for work. She didn't submit to any of the truly twisted stuff, like the crushing videos, but stuck mainly to the drowning. Sometimes quicksand, sometimes mud or jello. He showed me some of them. In most she began the affair with a smile of bright white teeth, but her eyes were sad, a girl who would rather be somewhere else and not selling herself out for the fetish of a twisted few. The tapes didn't so much disgust me as baffle me. How anyone could get turned on by the sight of a woman drowning was beyond me.

The Spielberg wannabe showed me the infamous footage of Mandi going under for the last time and kept it running through when two stagehands entered the frame and pulled her out of the quicksand, limp and covered in goop. I couldn't help but notice that Herr Director was not among the rescuing party.

"I guess somebody had to keep the cameras rolling, huh?"

He didn't answer. Just more of the surly gaze.

On the footage, one of Mandi's rescuers attempted to revive her with CPR. He was doing a pretty good job of it, too, but she was beyond saving. The other guy that helped pull her out stood by and watched, his eyes filling with tears. I pointed to the screen.

"Who's that one?"

He gave me the guy's name and address, then showed me the tub they used for the video. It was nothing more than a cheap empty kiddie pool. Dried oatmeal still clung to the sides. It was barely four feet deep.

"The police cleared me of all wrongdoing," the director said proudly. "They said it was an accident. You should know that Mandi had a nose for the toot. Every time she came in she was more wasted than before."

I nodded and turned to leave. But he wasn't finished.

"You know, you've got a great look."

I couldn't believe this clown. I knew what his next line would be even before he said it.

"Ever thought about being in the movies?"

"No. Have you?"

I took a drive down Ventura Boulevard and stopped by a burger joint to talk to Mandi's old roommate, a cute waitress named Sky. I sat outside under a huge umbrella and she took my order, surprised that I wanted a vanilla shake, cottage fries, and a double burger with all the trimmings, rare as they dared it.

"How can you eat all that and not put on any weight?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

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"You got great hair, too." She reached over and stroked my tresses. Women liked my hair. At the moment it was tied back but still dropped almost to my waist and shone blue-black in the California sun. Guys liked my hair, too, but they were suckers. Most of them, anyway.

"Mandi had great hair, too," Sky reminisced sadly. She wiped her nose, sniffling.

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, she was cool. She worked so hard, y'know? Tryin' to make it. She wanted to help her sister out, with the niece and nephew. She loved those kids."

I nodded. "How was her social life? Pretty girl like that must've had them howling at the moon."

Sky grinned. "Tommy was the only one she cared about."

I nodded again. Tom Hamilton was the guy on the tape who helped pull Mandi out of the tub. He was the one who was crying.

"How is he taking it?"

"Hasn't been around much," she said. "I'll go place your order, 'kay?" She sniffled again and bolted into the diner, rubbing her nose. I had a feeling she shared Mandi's candy habit. Young girls trying to have a little fun, maybe ease some of life's pains.

Both were barely twenty, brought up watching too much television, where "reality" shows gave America new idols every week or made heroes out of good-looking singles in search of compatibly vacant mates as cameras watched their every move. People competed in ridiculous contests and ate disgusting things, all for their fifteen minutes. Mandi might not have realized that true stardom was granted to only a blessed few, deserving or not, and usually only after years of hard work and dues-paying. For girls like Mandi and Sky, young and ambitious, the world around them seemed to move in slow motion.

I took surface streets back over the hill to where the air was cooler and there was a thick fog hanging over Venice Beach. Power lines crackled and zapped overhead as I parked in a narrow alley and made my way up rickety stairs to the single where Tommy Hamilton lived.

I knocked on the door and got nothing. I leaned over to peer through a gap in the curtains and could see him lying facedown on the couch. He didn't look too good.

I used my shoulder on the door but it was a tough one. Luckily, the ocean air and termites had done a job on the wood and the jamb splintered on the second shove. But I would still have a bruise and I didn't like bruises.

The stench of the place hit me like a wall, almost as tough as the door had been. Hard to believe a smell could evolve to something like this. Not even my ex used to let it get this bad in his poker-basement sanctum sanctorum.

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Tommy hadn't flinched since I busted in, still on the couch with his face buried in the cushions. One arm hung limp, knuckles dragging the floor. I turned him over and it was just as I'd suspected. He wasn't dead, just dead drunk.

He moaned, smacking his lips drily as I dragged him into the bathroom. He was a slight guy, wearing only a T-shirt and boxers, but in his current state he weighed half a ton. I draped him over the lip of the tub torso-first and cranked the knob. The underused nozzle exploded with some rust-colored water that quickly cleared as it sprayed Tommy's head. He sputtered and gasped and flailed about until I pulled him out and threw a dirty towel in his face.

"'s goin' on?" he asked before he even cleared his eyes and got a good look at me.

"I wanted to ask you about Mandi."

"Get out. I'm done with you cops."

He tried to stand but only wobbled drunkenly and fell on his butt.

"How long's it been since you've had anything to eat?"

He glared up at me, soppy hair hanging in front of his eyes like vines.

"Got any coffee in this place?" I asked.

He prefaced "you" with a terse verb delivered straight from the gut and followed that up by comparing me to a female dog. I let it slide and went into the kitchen.

Inside the freezer were mountains of white that would have stopped Shackleton in his tracks. Buried deep in the ice were a couple of Snickers bars and a tin of Folgers ground.

As the coffee was percolating, Tommy shuffled in, drying his hair with the towel. He still had that irritated glare in his eye but looked a little embarrassed as well.

"Sorry," he said.

I waved it off.

He sat at the table and I put a cup of steaming black coffee in front of him. He peered into it like a kid hesitating over a plate of broccoli. "I usually have it with milk and sugar."

"Not today, you don't."

He knew better than to push it. I didn't serve people very often and when I did they better be smart enough to take it and like it.

"So why don't you tell me what you didn't tell the cops?" I said.

"Whaddya mean?"

"I mean about what really happened to Mandi."

"It was an accident. She always talked about how someday she'd die drowning, she had nightmares about it."

"That tub was only four feet deep."

He got defensive."People drown in less than that. 'Sides, she was afraid of water, always had been."

"The cops buy that when you sold it to them?"

He looked up from his coffee. He knew I was smarter than

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the police.

"Her sister showed me the pictures," I said. "She'd been swimming since she could walk."

Tommy lowered his head, both hands cupped around his mug as if to draw the warmth into him.

"You and she were pretty tight, from what I hear. She didn't like the way her career was going, did she? Didn't like doing those fetish tapes."

"Can you blame her? I didn't like working on those sick things, either, but at least I didn't have to be in front of the camera. I told her to just move back to Portland, but she thought that would be like she was giving up or something. It was nuts, but she didn't want her sister to think she'd failed. Didn't want to disappoint her like she'd disappointed herself."

I'd heard the story a hundred times. I had a feeling there was one more piece to the puzzle but had no proof. Just intuition. So I took the gamble. "Why don't you show me the note?"

Tommy flinched as if he'd just sat on a tack and sobered up but quick. His mouth dropped open and he wanted to say, "How did you know?" but he didn't. Instead he pushed away from the table, found his wallet in the other room, and pulled a square of folded paper from inside it.

He handed it to me and I unfolded it. It was written in Mandi's flowing hand. It was short and to the point, and confirmed my suspicion. Her death wasn't an accident and it wasn't foul play. Just a sad ending for a girl whose dreams didn't play out as she wanted them to.

I took the 405 to the 5 Northbound and opened her up, letting the engine purr. The lonely stretch of road above the grapevine gave me time to think. I let Tommy keep the note; it was between him and Mandi and should stay that way. I knew Karla would be disappointed when I told her the police were right and her little sister was the victim of nothing more than a tragic accident, but it was better for her to go on thinking that's what happened. At least, I think it was better that way. I can't say I've always been right about the way to do things, but I always do my best. I wouldn't ask Karla to pay me for my time, but I would ask her to volunteer at the battered women's shelter or answer phones at the rape crisis center once a month. It wasn't necessary, of course, but I always made it clear to my former clients that I kept tabs on things like that.

As I drove further north, getting closer to home, the land around me got greener, wrapping me in nature and bringing a smile to my face. It was too bad Mandi couldn't have taken this drive just one more time; it would have let her know that what happened in L.A. didn't really matter in the grand scheme of things.

I'd heard it said of Hollywood, but it was true of life as well: There really are no such thing as failures, only those who quit too soon. ●

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ELLERY MEETS ARCHIE

an Interview with Timothy Hutton

by Steve Steinbock

We are fortunate that Academy Award winner Timothy Hutton took time away from a film set in Vancouver to speak with us. In *Secret Window* Hutton plays the lover of Mort Rainey's ex-wife.

EQMM: In *Secret Window,* you play Ted Milner. This is your second experience doing a film based on a Stephen King story, right?

HUTTON: That's right. The first one was *The Dark Half,* which George Romero directed. In that film I played two parts: a writer named Thad Beaumont, and the writer's alter ego, George Stark.

EQMM: Another tortured writer story. Is it similar to *Secret Window?*

HUTTON: I thought there were some interesting parallels to the two stories. But they were very different in terms of character and plot. The general themes are themes that Stephen King has written about before. He has a very fascinating way of looking at a writer's life, of being haunted by characters that a writer creates, and of being visited by fictitious characters, things like that.

EQMM: What is it like working on a Stephen King story?

HUTTON: The two that I've done are just wonderfully written. And both were adapted extremely well, the first one by George Romero and the second by David Koepp. It's kind of interesting that on both films, the screenwriter was also the director. That allows for a through-line of what the writer is imagining to what the director might visualize the text to be. It keeps it all consistent. In that sense, they were both great to work on. The material is just so rich, and it makes so many interesting turns, and there's a level of paranoia and tension throughout that keeps everything taut.

EQMM: When you first saw *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* mentioned in the script, what was your reaction?

HUTTON: My personal reaction was, "Oh, Dad played Ellery Queen in the TV series, this is great."

EQMM: Do you have recollections of your father playing Ellery Queen?

HUTTON: He loved doing the show. It was probably the happiest he had ever been in his career. He loved the material; he loved each of the stories, the people he was working with, and the character himself. He just loved playing Ellery Queen. He loved the relationship with the father, played by David Wayne, and the dynamics between the two of them. They became great friends, and really enjoyed working together. And all of the other characters. I remember John Hillerman played Simon Brimmer. It was a great experience for him.

EQMM: Have you ever read any of the Queen novels or stories?

HUTTON: Prior to my dad doing the series, no. But when I visited him, he had a lot of them in his collection. So I would occupy my time on the set reading Ellery Queen stories.

EQMM: That brings us to another fictional detective. Not only did you star as Archie Goodwin in *Nero Wolfe,* you worked behind the camera as executive producer and as director for several episodes. Were you involved in that project from the beginning?

HUTTON: Well, yeah, along with Michael Jaffe. The person who really

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spearheaded the whole project from the beginning was Michael Jaffe. And he then brought me in to play Archie for the first one we did, a two-hour movie called *The Golden Spiders.* When A&E decided they wanted to explore the possibility of doing more Rex Stout books, Michael and I formed a partnership and put together the crew and the cast and everything like that.

EQMM: Has *Nero Wolfe* been a fun project?

HUTTON: It really was. It was two years that were really creatively satisfying. Everyone had a wonderful time working on it. And it's something that we might do again. We might do a few more of the books down the road. That idea appeals to me a great deal, especially if we don't try to do a whole bunch in a short period of time, because they're difficult to do. They're "period" stories, and if we do more, I want to make sure that they're done right, and that we have the time to tell the story and not lose anything in the adaptation.

EQMM: Both the Ellery Queen show, which was set in the '40s and produced in the '70s, and the Nero Wolfe show were period pieces. Do people often make comparisons between Jim Hutton's career and yours?

HUTTON: I think that there's a very clear similarity at a particular stage: when my dad did *Ellery Queen* and when I did *Nero Wolfe*. But I don't know how much further to take that. It certainly wasn't planned that way. And even though they are both detective stories, they are very different, as any reader of Ellery Queen or Rex Stout would tell you.

EQMM: Do you enjoy mysteries?

HUTTON: I do.

EQMM: What do you think is their appeal?

HUTTON: It's a wonderful dramatic form. People like to solve puzzles. Especially puzzles that involve people, where people are the pieces of the puzzle, and there is a destination to arrive at, and one must put the pieces together and analyze it. I think it's everyone's nature to enjoy a certain kind of analytic process with storytelling, to see if everything fits and to look for clues. People probably have a better skill at it with fiction than they do in their own lives.

EQMM: What's next for Timothy Hutton?

HUTTON: I'm working on a five-hour miniseries right now for the SciFi Channel that'll be on in June. It's called *5 Days to Midnight.* It's about a physics professor who finds out he has five days to live. It'll run on five consecutive nights, and I'm playing the physics professor with five days to solve his own murder. ●

Though King's early work included stories (presumably) remote from his personal experience, focusing on subjects like telekinetic teenagers, possessed cars, and rabid Saint Bernards *(Carrie, Christine,* and *Cujo,* respectively), over the years he has drawn memorably on more personal nightmares as well, in particular the nightmares that haunt him as a writer. In *Misery,* he tells the story of an author who is held captive and forced to write against his will by his "number one fan." In *The Dark Half,* an author is faced with a killing spree apparently committed by his own pseudonym (with echoes of King's relationship with his

RAINEY DAYS by Charles Ardai (continued from page 4)

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sometime pseudonym, Richard Bachman). In *Bag of Bones* and *The Shining,* authors have to wrestle with crushing cases of writer's block while also confronting the hostile forces haunting their new homes. And in the novella "Secret Window, Secret Garden"—one of the four stories collected in *Four Past Midnight*—a writer has to face an accusation of plagiarism from a relentless and psychotic adversary.

As I say, it's not always fun to be a writer. But then again, sometimes it is. If, like me, you are a writer, and not only that, but a writer for this particular magazine, and not only that, but a lifelong reader and fan of this magazine besides, it's a special treat to see an *EQMM* writer cast as the main character in a big-budget suspense picture. I can imagine, now, what every tweedy archaeology professor must have felt like when *Raiders of the Lost Ark* opened. Not that any of us who write for *EQMM* would want the troubles poor Mort Rainey has—but which of us can resist the temptation to look up at the screen and see himself there? (I picture Ed Hoch turning to his wife, Pat, after a particularly exciting action scene and saying, "See? That's what it's like writing for *Ellery Queen.*")

When the time came for Stephen King to select an issue of *EQMM* for Mort Rainey's story to have appeared in, he chose the June 1980 issue, and his description of this magazine is so specific (even down to the names of the authors featured on the cover) that you would be forgiven for thinking the issue existed. It never did.

Why was there never a June 1980 issue? Well, actually there were two. For a couple of years in the early 1980s, when *EQMM* was publishing thirteen issues a year (one every four weeks like clockwork), there were some months in which two issues appeared, and to deal with this the editors experimented with dating the issues the way a daily newspaper or weekly magazine might. As a result, there was a June 2, 1980 issue and a June 30, 1980 issue—but no "June 1980" issue.

King would have known about this because the one time he had a story in *EQMM* was in the December 1, 1980 issue.

Now, there have been many memorable issues of *EQMM* over the past sixty-three years, not least of all the one in which King appeared. If you go back to 1946, no less a luminary than William Faulkner submitted a story that won him second place in the magazine's annual short story competition. (Yes, second place. Faulkner was still three years shy of winning the Nobel Prize, and after all, *EQMM* has its standards.) Two years later, the great Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges chose *EQMM* to be the first place ever to publish his work in English. Hollywood figures ranging from Orson Welles to Phyllis Diller and Milton Berle have published stories in these pages. So, too, has pretty much every major mystery writer you can think of, from Dashiell Hammett and Cornell Woolrich in the very first issue to folks like Lawrence Block, Mary Higgins Clark, Dick Francis, P. D. James, Ed McBain, Anne Perry, Ruth Rendell, and Andrew Vachss in later decades. Even Al Nussbaum, who spent a portion of the 1960s on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted **continued on page 135**

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

MURDER IN THE PINEAPPLE PIT

by Amy Myers

"The pineapple, Mr. Didier!"

Startled, Auguste almost dropped his precious chef's knife box as he stepped down from the carriage.

A full female figure, clad in bright yellow robes that flapped wildly around her feet, hurried across the gravel drive towards him. "You are here!" she continued grandly, though somewhat unnecessarily.

"Is this Mrs. Wisley-Talbot?" he hissed at the coachman.

"Yes." The coachman's general air of gloom said it all.

Auguste awaited his doom as his temporary—very temporary, thank goodness—employer covered the last few yards between them. He saw that her tall green hat was shaped like a pineapple crown, completing the effect of her resembling a pineapple herself. Why had he accepted this job? Only the sheer outrageousness of

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the mission, to cook a whole celebratory dinner for thirty guests based solely on this fruit, intrigued him. The dinner, to which he had been summoned at very short notice, was to take place tomorrow evening, to open the second summer season of Talbot Towers Hotel for Health. Auguste was already bitterly regretting his decision to come.

In Auguste's opinion, the pineapple was a most disobliging fruit. It refused to cooperate with other ingredients by relinquishing its own personality. The pineapple might appear in public with other fruits, but would never compromise its flavour to assist the creative cook. It consented to be frittered, chipped, preserved, soufflèed, caked, canned, and ice-creamed, but its taste always remained aloof. Only in one respect did it concede its sovereignty in taste. It liked rum, and on this basis Auguste could see a gleam of hope that his art might win the challenge.

The road that leads from printed story to dramatic performance is a two-way street. There are probably as many authors who choose the worlds of movies, theater, radio, and TV as subjects for their fiction as there are those who see adaptation to those arts as their object. Amy Myers' fascination with the performing arts reveals itself most often in stories about live theater. But earlier this year she provided us with a superb story about silent-movie fandom (see "Valentino's Valediction" 3-4/04). ¶

Mrs. Wisley-Talbot beamed happily as she reached him. "You must come at once," she cried.

Auguste bowed. "I am honoured to—"

"Oh, don't bother with that, please," she exclaimed impatiently. "It is waiting for you."

"It, madame?"

"The pineapple, of course. The very first fruit of the new season. One really can't count Lord Carrington."

"Who is he, madame?"

"He's a pineapple." His employer regarded her new chef doubtfully, for displaying such ignorance. "A winter-fruiting variety. But now we have plucked the fruit of the pit that my poor dear husband and I planted together in August, eighteen ninety-three. I have waited eighteen months for this day."

"I congratulate you, madame." It was the only thing Auguste could think of to say.

"Oh, Mr. Didier," she continued, "isn't it exciting? Do you know, we now have ten pits, all planted with pineapples at various stages of growth."

"Very exciting, madame." His heart sank. Could even he, Auguste Didier, successfully cook such a meal? He began to see why Signor Antonio Morelli, the resident chef, had chosen this

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particular time to break his leg.

All the ideas for pineapple recipes that he had forced himself to contemplate on the train journey to Sussex now fled in horror faced with the reality of a hotel based, so far as he could gather, on the notion that the pineapple was the fount of a healthy life. No doubt it played its part, but so did the humble cabbage, and the cabbage was a great deal more cooperative in the kitchen.

He was swept not into the kitchens, or to his room, but in through the main entrance of Talbot Towers itself, an imposing Gothic structure in red brick that pleased, in Auguste's eye, by its absurdity, rather than as an architectural delight to the eye.

In the drawing room, three people awaited them. He saw a sullen Italianate-looking man with a broken leg, whom he had no difficulty in identifying as the injured chef. There was a tall, lean woman of middle age, clad in what used to be termed aesthetic dress, whom he was informed was Mrs. Wisley-Talbot's sister-in-law, Miss Jane Talbot, and an amiable somewhat younger man, whom Auguste recognised from Plum's, the gentleman's club in London where he had worked for some time. It was Lord Sackton. It was not, however, this trio who first drew Auguste's attention.

It was the huge pineapple that balanced on a cake stand, framed by an arch of greenery and flowers, and positioned on a table around which its admirers were gathered in, he presumed, adoration.

"My dears," Leonora Wisley-Talbot announced, flinging her arms wide to encompass everyone, including Auguste, "our celebration begins. Is she not beautiful, Mr. Didier? Our Charlotte Rothschild, plucked from her mother in the pit but thirty minutes ago."

"Dear Charlotte," Jane exclaimed earnestly. "Such maturity, such presence. Leonora, I feel a poem arising within me."

"Seems a pity to cook her, what?" Lord Sackton brought the tone down a little.

"How will you cook this treasure, Frenchman?" Antonio grinned at Auguste as though he guessed that for the first time in his life Auguste had absolutely no idea.

"Cook her?" Leonora was appalled. "This, our first-born of the year, will glorify us with her presence until after tomorrow's opening celebration, and then be preserved." Auguste relaxed at this heaven-sent opportunity not to answer the chef's question.

"Preserve her for Percy, eh?" Lord Sackton suggested.

"Poor dear Percy." Leonora sighed. "My husband, Mr. Didier. He went, you know."

"He passed over, madame?" Auguste asked sympathetically.

"To Jamaica," Jane explained. "He and Leonora lived there until they came back here three years ago. Percy didn't like being back, though."

An awkward silence fell, which seemed odd to Auguste, but then

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everything at Talbot Towers seemed odd.

Lord Sackton broke it. "Good riddance, if you ask me, eh?"

"I didn't, Charles." Leonora looked hurt. "I wonder what poor Percy is doing now?"

"Seducing some wench, no doubt," Charles retorted more robustly than Auguste had hitherto given him credit for.

"He is in Jamaica to look for suitable propagating suckers," Leonora said reproachfully. "And then he will return. Percy adores me."

"We all do, madam," Antonio said silkily, then turned his attention to Auguste again. "So, Mr. French Chef, what pineapple recipes have you planned?"

Fortunately Auguste was once more saved from answering, this time by the sound of altercation outside the door. It was a familiar sound to Auguste, one he remembered from his service days. It was the sound of a butler trying to keep someone out from The Presence. The butler had obviously lost, for the door burst open and in came a white-faced gardener—judging by the boots still caked with mud.

"Beg pardon, missis." The man was trembling.

"Oh, Jacob," Leonora looked horrified. "Please don't tell me you've lost a pineapple plant."

"No, missis. It's the new pit. The one you planted last August."

Leonora gasped with horror. "Not mealy bugs again, Jacob?"

"No, missis. I went to trim the spare suckers off, ma'am. And then I thought I'd fill in the ridges between the plants with more earth. I was poking around—" he began to choke—"and went through the turf layer into the leaves. Felt something—" He stopped abruptly.

"Well, Jacob?"

"There's a body in there, missis."

The remains of the late Mr. Percy Wisley-Talbot had been duly removed from the pineapple pit. Lord Sackton, acting with unusual decision, had postponed the grand opening of the Hotel for Health for two weeks, and the Sussex police had temporarily departed from Talbot Towers with all the information they had been able to gather to put before the coroner. Which, Auguste concluded, had not been a great deal. The body had been unrecognisable, owing to decomposition, and had it not been for Percy's unique pineapple-shaped cuff links, identification might have been a long process.

So far as Auguste, a mere onlooker, had been able to gather, the local police were optimistically inclining to the view that Percy, on the point of leaving for Jamaica last August, had been so overcome with emotion at the thought of leaving the pineapple pits, even in such an honourable cause as seeking new suckers, that he had suffered a seizure and fallen headlong into the pit, whereupon the four-foot-deep leaf bed had been disturbed both by the fall and by

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subsequent winds and rearranged itself over him. The layer of turf then laid by the gardener over the leaves to seal the bed in ensured the body was completely hidden, especially since high earth ridges had then been built over the turf to take the suckers and subsequent plants.

"That's all I can think, Mr. Didier," Jacob Leggatt said heavily as they had stared together into the forty-foot-long pit: "Who would do such a thing to a pineapple pit? I'm going to have to do this pit out with sulphur and plant something else here. It'll take two or three years before I can put a respectable pineapple back in here. You being a craftsman yourself in a way, Mr. Didier, will understand that. Would you let corruption stain your working table?"

Artist was more how Auguste viewed himself, but he saw Jacob's point, and made sympathetic noises.

Encouraged, Jacob took him by the arm and led him to the corner of the pit where his collection of tools was stored. "It's time to go to battle, Mr. Didier, and these here are my weapons. There are creatures in this world that are evil, creatures that pretend to love the pineapple but bring only death and destruction."

"And they are, Mr. Leggatt?" There was only one way to stop an enthusiast and that was to hear him out. Auguste waited patiently.

"The mealy bug," Jacob replied darkly. "Crickets and cockroaches come marching in later, but you can't start too early for white and brown scale, and the Bug. That's why I likes to be prepared."

Auguste stared mystified at the pile of long sticks with sponges carefully attached at the top, spraying equipment, knives, cutters, and thin skewers. Then he wondered whether it was fair to consider Jacob a fanatic, when he himself never travelled anywhere without his knife box.

Relieved of the oppressive need to invent pineapple recipes at short notice (pineapple and parsnip, perhaps?), Auguste was curious about Percy's death. He remembered that awkward silence yesterday, considered the unlikelihood of accident, and felt sympathy not only for the victim but, unexpectedly, the pineapples whose pit had been so brutally and violently invaded by murder. Surely it must have been a human hand that had helped Percy in and covered up the body? One of the advantages of being a chef was that he was able to glean gossip both from kitchen and drawing room, being not fully a member of either society but accepted by both; also, this meant that he was able to wander the vegetable gardens without eyebrows being raised.

There was one aspect about this murder that particularly intrigued him. Human bodies did not decompose without side effects, one of which was usually all too obvious if the remains were close to the earth's surface. Four feet of packed-down leaves

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would not be sufficient to absorb smell. He put this point to Jacob.

"Ah, sir, I can see you don't know anything about pineapples."

The crazed eye of the enthusiast lit Jacob's face, and Auguste resigned himself to being instructed at even more length. Jacob was a small, sturdy man of perhaps fifty, and now that he had recovered from the immediate shock was only too eager to talk about the horror of his discovery. Cooks and gardeners had much in common, and Auguste liked what he knew of Jacob.

"This pit was planted with new suckers last August, see, the newest of the pits. The missis and I did it together one Saturday afternoon. I did the turfing and put the earth on top of it in the morning, then we had a little ceremony to plant the suckers. After planting, you can close the pit up for winter, and don't usually need to disturb it till February, unless it be very dry. The leaves provide underneath heat, and them pipes back and front give heat all round; the troughs fixed on them take water for evaporation."

"But when you opened it up to water in February, did you not notice the smell?" Auguste persisted.

"I did, Mr. Didier. But our little Queens get smelly anyway being shut up all winter, so I never noticed any extra. I don't go round expecting dead bodies in my pits, Mr. Didier, and that's a fact. It's desecration, that's what it is."

"Didn't you open the pit after February? That's nearly three months ago now."

"Well, now, that's true. Our little darlings like to be on the dry side, but they like a good drink every now and then. Like we all do, Mr. Didier." (Auguste obediently laughed.) "I noticed nothing, although, mind you, I did wonder why some of the plants were doing well and some weren't. Poor old Mr. Percy, eh?"

"When do you think he—er—fell into the pit?"

"No doubt about that. He came to see me on the Friday afternoon. Sorry to be leaving, Jacob, he says, and all the best. That's all right, sir, you just bring back some nice new suckers, I said. And enjoy the party this evening. I will, he says. So it's to my thinking he came here for a bit of air that night, after the party. Just one last look at the pits before he left. Then he was taken by the sadness of it all, and went then and there. A good way to go, Mr. Didier."

Diplomatically, Auguste said nothing, but he decided he had a duty to the late Mr. Percy Wisley-Talbot. Everyone was too eager for this to be an accident, as if they were on the side of the pineapples rather than their owner's. Everyone was also far too eager to tell him how enthusiastic Percy was about pineapples. Yesterday evening, however, as family and servants had gathered to pay their respects as Percy's remains were taken away, a slightly different picture had emerged. At his side, Jacob had removed his hat as the van passed. "There goes a true lover of pineapples," he

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pronounced as he replaced his hat and turned to go back to his beloved pits. His wife Martha did not join him but walked away toward their home, still sobbing bitterly.

Chef Antonio Morelli, whom Auguste had escorted there on his crutches, had given a snort of derision at Jacob's comment. When Auguste had looked at him in surprise, he hissed, "Mr. Percy hate the pineapple. Like I do. That why he going to Jamaica. He want to stay there, too. Antonio, you run hotel, he say."

"You hate pineapples, too?" Auguste began to realise they had more in common than he had thought. "Then why do you want to run the hotel?"

"Same reason I cook here. Is good job. Anyway," a happy thought struck Antonio, "when I manager, you come here and cook the pineapples, yes?" He looked hopefully at Auguste. "I treat you good."

Auguste swallowed. Cook with pineapples forever? Never. "That is very good of you. I'll consider it." Now was not the time to confess his own weakness. "So Mr. Percy intended to leave his wife?"

"Mrs. Pineapple? Yes. I tell you secret, Mr. Chef. He love gardener's wife, Mrs. Martha. I like Mrs. Martha and Mr. Percy, too. He talk to me because he know I no like pineapples, either. Mr. Percy say he going to meet her at pineapple pits after party that Friday night."

It was then that Auguste had determined to press a little deeper into what was beginning to appear a hotbed of fermentation in itself, and he had hurried to catch up to Martha to express his condolences for her distress.

"You were very fond of Mr. Percy?" he asked gently.

"He was a good master to us."

"And he was fond of you?"

She glanced at him. "Antonio's been talking, has he? I might have known. You won't have been the only person he's told, I'll be bound. Well, so what? One of them pineapple crackpots killed him to stop him."

"Stop what?" Auguste asked quietly.

"Percy taking me to Jamaica, of course. There's nothing for me here now."

Martha was a plump, still pretty woman who looked closer to sanity than anyone Auguste had yet met at Talbot Towers. She might have given Percy a happy life.

"You were to meet him that Friday evening?"

She nodded. "At ten-thirty. We were going to leave together that night. I waited, but he never came."

"And your husband?"

"How would you like a wife who only wants to go to bed with a pineapple? Well, I have a husband like that. Jacob spends his day at the pits and his evenings at the pub; that's how Percy and I knew it would be safe to meet there."

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"And what happened when Percy didn't come?"

"I waited, and waited, and then went home. I waited again for him next morning at the coach house, but when he didn't appear I thought he had gone off to Jamaica without me. I've thought badly of him all these months, Mr. Didier. And now this. Poor Percy. Done in by one of them at the Towers, who were afraid they'd have to do without pineapples when Percy sold it."

"*Sold* it?"

She looked taken aback. "Oh yes, didn't Antonio tell you that tidbit?"

"No, he didn't," Auguste said grimly. How did that fit with his "promise" to Antonio that he could be manager? There was plenty to intrigue him here, but he had to go back to London. He could manufacture no excuse to stay on at Talbot Towers, so there was nothing he could do about Percy. Or was there?

"Let's get this straight, Auguste." Inspector Egbert Rose sighed. "Buried in a pineapple pit, was he?"

"Yes, Egbert."

"They think the body hopped in of its own accord?"

"Yes, Egbert."

"No one see anything strange in that?"

"No, Egbert."

"So you thought I might like to get involved?"

"Yes, Egbert."

Egbert regarded his friend sourly. "Tell me how he died."

"I do not know. Strangled perhaps. Shot or—"

"Poisoned by pineapple?" Egbert supplied helpfully. "Stabbed with its crown?"

"Not poisoned, Egbert." Auguste knew he was expected to reply seriously. "How would the killer know where or when he had died, and how would he get the body to the pit? Bodies are not light."

"Thank you, Auguste. I'll remember that. Now, tell me about these pineapple people. I've no doubt you've been listening at a few keyholes."

Auguste ignored the gibe. "Talbot Towers was owned by the late Percy Wisley-Talbot, it was his family home. He and his wife lived in Jamaica for some years, then decided to return home to glorify the pineapple. Growing it in England had fallen somewhat out of fashion. This required money, so they decided to keep the Towers, and open the hotel as an answer to this problem. When I say they," Auguste added honestly, "it might have been *she* alone; Mrs. Wisley-Talbot is a lady of strong opinions."

"It costs money to set up a hotel."

"I gather Lord Sackton pays the operating costs. Percy only provided use of the house."

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"So why would anyone want to murder him—unless you think he was so fond of pineapples he chose that very peculiar spot for suicide?"

"For the very good reason that although everyone seems to believe Percy loved pineapples and that he was leaving for Jamaica to seek new varieties, I was told by the chef that Percy hated pineapples, and that Antonio could be the new manager, as he was planning to stay in Jamaica. He was in love with the gardener's wife, who says she was meeting him that Friday night at the pineapple pits to go with him. *She* says Percy planned to sell Talbot Towers."

Egbert digested this. "That's a pineapple and a half, all right," he commented approvingly. "What exactly happened?"

Auguste explained to him how pineapple pits worked and Jacob's opinion that the death occurred after the Friday-night party. "Martha is convinced that one of the pineapple crackpots, as she terms them, got wind of Percy's plans to leave for good and sell the Towers. She waited in vain at the pits for Percy to arrive."

"Already in his bed of leaves." Egbert grunted. "Unless she did it herself?"

"Why should she? Unless he had decided not to take her."

"In that case, why should he bother to turn up at all? What about the others at the house? Could the wife have done it? She stood to gain most."

Auguste tried hard to envisage the pineapple-clad Leonora as a murderer and failed. But then he couldn't imagine anyone else there committing murder—except perhaps Antonio. Antonio, who would be manager if Percy left, but jobless if the Towers were sold, and who had not told him of Percy's intention. Did he know it or not? Auguste was glad he was not a policeman. It was hard to like people and then have to consider them as murderers. He had to bear in mind that just because the inmates of Talbot Towers were eccentric that did not mean they could not carry their eccentricity to extreme lengths—such as murder.

"It is possible, Egbert," Auguste conceded.

"Suppose the gardener chap had found out about his wife? Seems to me he's in the best position to bury bodies in pits."

"He said he had talked to Percy that afternoon, not in the evening."

"He said that, did he?"

Crestfallen, Auguste saw his point. "There is Lord Sackton, too," he added, eager to regain his reputation. "His money was tied up in the hotel and he is said to be in love with Mrs. Wisley-Talbot."

"Anyone else for the merry-go-round?"

"The head chef, Antonio Morelli, saw himself as manager of the hotel," he admitted unwillingly, not wishing to betray a fellow chef, "but he did not know about Talbot Towers being sold."

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"Because he didn't tell you that?"

Auguste flushed and turned to more fertile fields. "Percy's sister Jane Talbot lives at Talbot Towers, and is deeply involved in pineapples. She gives evening entertainments in the shape of her poems, which she sets to music and plays on the harp. Poems about the pineapple."

Egbert fixed him with a stern stare. "Now you are pulling my leg."

"No, Egbert. I would not dare. Although I dislike pineapples, except perhaps with rum, others have different views. Miss Talbot is one of them."

"Obviously. Any reason this poetess would want to kill her brother?"

"She would be homeless if the Towers were sold, but I doubt if she is penniless."

Egbert wandered over to the window and gazed down at the River Thames and the road below him. "Out there," he observed, "I can see maybe a hundred people at any one time. Of them, ninety-nine are perfectly normal and the hundredth is barmy. How is it, Auguste, that when you bring a case to me you've scooped up every hundredth person you can find?"

"Would you come, Egbert, if the local police request it?"

"Yes." Egbert paused evilly. "Provided you cook me a Pineapple au Didier."

"You believe Percy was murdered? Oh, poor dear Percy." Leonora, clad in mourning, was distraught. "I shall plant a whole pit of Black Jamaica in his honour."

"He'd have liked that, madam," Egbert replied stolidly.

"But who could have done such a terrible thing?" Leonora looked helplessly at Auguste, albeit somewhat puzzled as to why her temporary chef should be present.

"It seems probable he was stabbed, madam, during the night before he was to leave for Jamaica."

"We had a party to bid him farewell. A pineapple party." Leonora looked as guilty as if this fact had contributed to his death. As perhaps it did, Auguste reflected. "Antonio made the most lovely pineapple julep and we had pineapple pork and Jane's poems. Not that we ate those," she added, muddled. "They were set to harp music."

"It sounds very nice, madam," Egbert said gallantly.

"He loved it, Inspector, especially the pineapple canapés. Oh, it was such fun."

Auguste shuddered.

"Jane sang beautifully," Leonora continued. "And the Lady Beatrice Lambton was splendid."

"Lady Beatrice sang, too?" Egbert asked, busily writing notes.

"She was made into a soufflé," Leonora explained.

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"A pineapple, Inspector Rose," Auguste murmured, straight-faced.

Egbert ignored him. "Nothing to upset Mr. Wisley-Talbot during the evening, then?"

"Of course not. Percy was devoted to the cause of the pineapple."

"I've heard that wasn't the case, madam," Egbert said so agreeably that Leonora took a moment to realise she was being challenged.

"You, Inspector—" she wagged a finger at him—"have been listening to gossip. Percy adored pineapple. Why else would he have gone back to Jamaica?"

"He didn't get there," Egbert pointed out.

"But he meant to," she said firmly. "To collect new varieties."

"So he wasn't planning to close the hotel by selling this house?"

Leonora went very white, but made a gallant comeback. "He may have threatened that, the silly boy. But he didn't mean it."

Egbert let this pass. "What happened after this party ended?"

"After Jane's delightful recital, we took supper and retired for the night. About ten o' clock. I didn't see poor Percy again."

"Did you not expect to see him next morning when he should have left for Jamaica?"

"No. The morning is my special time for inspecting the pits," Leonora explained.

"So you must have inspected the pit he was found in. Did you see anything unusual?"

She looked aghast. "Nothing. And that was the day that I later planted the Smooth Cayennes with Jacob." Her voice faltered.

"Did you ask the coachman whether your husband caught the train as arranged?"

"No. Should I have done?" she asked anxiously. "Poor Percy was quite capable of taking the carriage to the station. It didn't occur to me. There was the planting of the pit to consider."

This sounded reasonable enough in the context of Talbot Towers life, Auguste thought.

"Perhaps," Egbert suggested, "I might meet the others present at that farewell party."

"Of course." Leonora rang the bell, and in due course Lord Sackton, Miss Talbot, and Signore Morelli appeared, accompanied, to Auguste's alarm, by tea and pineapple cake. "Do sit down, Antonio." Leonora waved a gracious hand. "My dear friend as well as chef," she explained to Egbert. "How devoted he is to the pineapple."

Auguste caught Antonio's eye and hastily looked away. Instead he concentrated his thoughts on how to avoid eating this terrible-looking cake. He wondered if the potted palm next to him would object to this change in its diet, and decided it wouldn't, cruel fate though it seemed.

"I'd like you all to tell me what you remember of that farewell party for Mr. Wisley-Talbot," Egbert began.

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This proved a cue for silence. "We had a pineapple thing for dinner," Lord Sackton offered at last.

"Ananas alla Veneziana," Antonio muttered.

"Pineapple, kirsch, and cream," Auguste translated for Egbert's benefit.

"Boeuf aux ananas, pineapple *paupiettes, potage aux ananas,"* Antonio continued gloomily.

"And after that?" Egbert enquired.

"I first recited and then sang my new poem, 'Ode for the Queen,' " Jane said proudly.

"The loyal toast?" Egbert said.

"It was indeed." Jane then began to sing in an offkey and quavery voice:

Plump and glorious,
You wear the crown.
Lady victorious,
In your yellow gown.
Hot iron in your chest
Gives strength to fruity breast—

"What's that about Queen Victoria's chest?" Egbert whispered to Auguste.

"The Queen is a pineapple, Egbert." Auguste began to enjoy this. Jane gave them a furious look, and continued to the end of her song.

"Thank you, Miss Talbot," Egbert said hastily when she showed signs of an encore.

"After supper, we went to our rooms," Lord Sackton said nervously. "Percy said he wanted a last stroll to look at the pits. Poor old Percy. Wanted to check for crickets, I suppose. The devil at that time of year."

"To think my poem of praise to the pineapple was the last song he heard," Jane said sadly. "It was Percy's requiem. He died happy with the thought of his Pineapple Queen uppermost."

"So it wouldn't be true," Egbert said, "as I've been told, that Mr. Wisley-Talbot didn't like pineapple, that he was planning to stay in Jamaica, that he was taking Mrs. Martha Leggatt with him, and would be selling Talbot Towers?"

"Sell the Towers?" Antonio screeched, his eye on Auguste. "I did not tell you that."

"No, Antonio, but you knew it," he replied firmly.

Antonio turned red. "And what if I did? Everyone knew, not just me. He told everyone at the party he was going to sell. I was there. He told you, madam—" his dark eyes fixed on Leonora—"whom I love and honour above all women, that he was tired of pineapples and you, and that he would remain in Jamaica. He told you, Lord Sackton, the hotel would have to close. And you, Miss Talbot—"

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"Don't you dare say a word," Jane wailed.

"That your voice was as unmusical as a corn crake with a bad cold, that your poems were funnier than Lewis Carroll—"

"But they are serious, they are for the pineapple," Jane moaned.

"—and listening to them worse than Wagner played backwards."

"We didn't agree with him, Jane," Leonora cried, rushing to throw her arms round Jane as she rocked to and fro in distress. "Poor Percy didn't *mean* what he said. That was why we didn't tell you, Inspector. Just because he threw the pineapple *paupiettes* at poor Charles—"

Lord Sackton gave an inarticulate moan.

"—didn't mean that Percy wasn't enjoying every mouthful. He used to get these strange fancies. . . ." Leonora came to a halt and sank down on her chair again in despair.

"I quite understand, madam," said Egbert levelly.

"They're all mad, of course," Egbert announced gloomily as he and Auguste walked through the grounds towards the pineapple pits. "My money's on the crazy poetess. She followed Percy to the pits to tell him what she thought of him. Hurt pride, if you ask me. Just like you when I don't like one of your recipes."

Auguste glared at him. "I thought it was a splendid poem."

"Then your tastebuds are letting you down."

"Because," Auguste explained with dignity, "it gave me an idea. Hot iron in your chest, Egbert."

"Pardon?"

"A line from the 'Ode for the Queen.' "

"I remember. Queen Victoria's bosom."

"It reminded me of something I learned about the pineapple. A hot iron can be put into its centre to stop all the strength going into the crown."

"So?"

"Suppose one went into Percy? Jacob showed me the tools he keeps in the corner of the pit for dealing with pineapple diseases. One of them was a long stiletto-like skewer—the hot iron, no doubt."

"That seems very likely. Handy for the killer. But what's important is who was at the other end of it. If that was the weapon, it has to be someone who knew it was there. Back to the gardener again. Found out about his wife, I expect."

"All the pineapple lovers would know the instruments were there; even the pineapple haters would know in this house. Love them or loathe them, they are all pineapple crazy," Auguste said. "I believe it was someone who hated pineapples."

"You?"

"Do not jest, Egbert. I am sure I am right. An iron like this is meant to help the pineapple flourish. To use it for murder would be a kind of desecration to a pineapple lover." He remembered Jacob's words.

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"Not sure I follow you."

"To bury a body in the leaves of the pineapple pit, knowing plants were to be grown in it, would be another act of desecration."

"I still don't see." Egbert was listening, though.

"None of the pineapple crackpots would commit such an act."

"It had to be your chum Antonio, then. He had reason enough, and he doesn't like pineapples."

"No. He would have either to cook the pineapples that grew here or, if he were manager then, eat them. They would be pineapples born of murder and corruption, and knowing that, he would never allow them in his kitchen."

"Who then?"

"She whose husband wanted a pineapple in his bed: Martha Leggatt. She who therefore hated pineapples. She with whom Percy had been carrying on, and who had expected to accompany him to Jamaica. She who was the only person who claimed he intended to take her. Percy didn't change his mind, because he had never considered or proposed it in the first place. He came to the pits to say goodbye and to warn her that he'd just decided to sell the Towers, so she killed him."

"Why? Spite?"

"Partly, but it was more than that. She might not like pineapples, but she likes security. With the Towers sold, Jacob would be out of a job and house, and her with him. A spur of the moment murder with her husband's tools close at hand."

A long pause. Then: "It was what you might call a rum do, Auguste. A Pineapple au Didier. Who said you couldn't do wonders with pineapples?" ○

RAINEY DAYS by CHARLES ARDAI continued from page 121

list for bank robbery (and then another portion in Leavenworth with plenty of time to hone his writing skills), graced *EQMM*'s pages with a story or two.

Memorable issues, all. But thanks to "Secret Window, Secret Garden," which was read by millions, and now the movie, which will no doubt be seen by millions more, the best-remembered issue of *EQMM* is likely to be one that never even existed.

Of course, it could work the opposite way—rather than thinking the invented issue really existed, it occurs to me that some people who see the movie and don't know any better might assume that *EQMM* is as fictitious as Mort Rainey and John Shooter, a figment of Stephen King's fertile imagination. If they later see a copy of the magazine in a bookstore or on a newsstand, they may conclude that the magazine was inspired by the movie, much as the Holiday Inn chain of hotels was inspired by the Irving Berlin musical of the same name.

In some strange hall-of-mirrors way, that would be very satisfying. Borges, certainly, would have appreciated it.

continued on page 143

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DIRECTOR'S CUT

an Interview with David Koepp

by Steve Steinbock

EQMM: Tell us about how you came across "Secret Window, Secret Garden."

KOEPP: It was easy! It showed up. There is an executive from Columbia who had optioned the story from Stephen King, and called me and said, "This might be up your alley, why don't you take a look." So I did. And I liked it very much. There you have it.

EQMM: As with *The Trigger Effect* and *Stir of Echoes,* you were the screenwriter as well as the director. How is it directing a film in which you've had a major hand in the screenplay?

KOEPP: Well, it's the third time I've done it, so I'm getting used to it. What's wonderful is you get to see your ideas all the way through from beginning to end. When you write and hand it off to someone else to direct, their job is to interpret your work, so it's going to come out different than you expect. It may come out better. I've been fortunate enough to work with some really brilliant directors. But it always comes out different. So you're always left to wonder what it would have been like if you had carried it through all the way the way you saw it initially. So it's better because you get a chance to see it all the way through. It's more creatively satisfying. What's not great about it is that you lose a valuable collaborator. A writer is really important to a director because that's the only person who has the same creative stake in the project as you do. And sometimes when it's late at night, and you're shooting, and you're confused about something, it's great to have that other person there who's been involved as long as you have.

EQMM: Was Stephen King involved in the screenwriting process?

KOEPP: Not really. I mean, he read a draft and gave comments which were helpful. He's had so many movies made of his books that he realizes the thing to do is to sort of stand back and let you do your thing. He knows you've got to make your movie and it's going to be different from the book.

EQMM: You seem to like thrillers.

KOEPP: Yes. I like suspense very much.

EQMM: What's the attraction?

KOEPP: I just think it's uniquely filmic. It's one of those things that movies are very very good at. And I guess I respond to paranoia and that kind of thing. I don't know why. I don't know why you like what you like. When I was writing the script for *Panic Room,* I was talking to Brian De Palma, and he asked, "What's it about?" And I said, "You know, same old thing. Upper-middle-class white people afraid in their houses. I can't face this again." And he said, "Relax. It's called who you are. You write what's in you."

EQMM: Do you enjoy reading crime, suspense, thrillers?

KOEPP: Sure, when they're good.

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EQMM: Any particular authors stand out?

KOEPP: I haven't read a novel since I started shooting this movie. But I love Elmore Leonard. James Ellroy I like. His best thing, I thought, was *My Dark Places.*

EQMM: When you put this film together, you chose to keep the name of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* prominently in the story. Wouldn't it have been easier to change it to a generic no-name publication?

KOEPP: No. The great thing about it is that it's such a wonderful name, and it's so well known. At least, well known to me—and people of my ilk. And it's so specific, it's great. I don't think there are any disadvantages to it. I thought it was fun once we cast Tim Hutton, whose father had played Ellery Queen on television. It's a great literary magazine. It's been around for a long time. And it's also graphically very strong. The covers are great. And since it figures prominently in the story, we wanted something that was good to look at. The cover we chose [from the June, 1995 issue of *EQMM*] shows a woman's feet in red heels going up a set of stairs and in the background there's a man with a gun. And there's a shot in the movie where the magazine is flung open on a step as Maria Bello's character climbs the stairs at a moment of great danger. And her foot lands right next to the woman's foot, and it's very nice.

EQMM: Prior to working on this project, had you read the magazine?

KOEPP: When I was younger I had.

EQMM: When you hear the name "Ellery Queen," what's the image that comes to mind?

KOEPP: The fedora. Immediately. When the television show was on in the mid seventies, I loved it. I picked up the magazine back then.

EQMM: What was it like working with Stephen King and with the lead actors?

KOEPP: With Stephen King, first of all, it's the best deal in the world. He has all the controls over the project, but he doesn't use any of it. He can veto anything at any point, but he doesn't. It's great. He gives you a lot of respect, and a lot of room. You can't beat that.

EQMM: And Johnny Depp?

KOEPP: Johnny is great. He's extremely inventive. And he's also on a real roll in his career right now, not just in terms of popular success, but artistically. And he comes with tons of ideas, and that's what you want. You want an actor who's going to bring a lot of ideas. And then you hash them out, see what works and what doesn't. But what's great is, since he's playing a writer, which is ultimately a boring character—They're people who sit and stare, and that's just not cinematic—you want the most inventive actor you can get. And to me that was Johnny. Movies about writers tend to be boring. But this one isn't, because I think he's so extremely creative.

EQMM: What is John Turturro like?

KOEPP: Turturro was really great too. I mean, he's playing a more extreme character. So he plays off Johnny's naturalism with a more stylized performance. Because he's playing someone who's really extreme.

EQMM: And working with Timothy Hutton?

KOEPP: Hutton was great. I mentioned to him about his dad playing Queen, and he said, "Yeah, that occurred to me, too, it's funny." ●

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LAST MAN TO DIE

by Ellery Queen

Our selection from the voluminous work of Ellery Queen has a form similar to one of the popular Queen radio dramas that gripped audiences from 1939 to 1948, complete with the "Challenge to the Reader," which on the air was often a challenge to a special celebrity guest. The Ellery Queen mysteries were the first one-hour dramatic performances in radio history, and their continuation for an extraordinary 9 years was assured when a transmitter malfunction on an early show left thousands of listeners, who flooded the station with complaints, without the solution to the mystery. ¶

For well over once around the clock Ellery tried to breathe life into The Butler who was lying in the way of the new Queen novel's progress.

In the fourteenth futile hour Ellery detected the difficulty: It was so long since he had seen a real live butler that it was like trying to bring a brontosaurus to life.

The situation obviously called for research; and making a haggard mental note to start looking for a specimen—assuming the breed was not extinct—Ellery collapsed.

He had no sooner closed his eyes, it seemed, than the alarm clock brought him up with a leap, groping. Noting blearily that the time was 8:07 A.M. and the alarm was off, he concluded: It's the doorbell ringing. And he staggered to the apartment door to find himself blinking out at a girl, 38-23-36, with eyes of blue, and red hair, too. Oh, brother!

"Mr. Queen?" asked a voice like temple bells, eyeing the Queen dishevelment doubtfully. "Am I inconvenient?"

"Not even after only two hours and eleven minutes' sleep," said Mr. Queen, quickly showing her in. "With whom do I have the pleasure?"

"Edie Burroughs," said the belle with the bell voice, turning pink and pleased, "and I have a problem."

"Haven't we all? Mine concerns a butler."

"Well, isn't that weird!" she cried. "So does mine. In fact, two of them. Did you ever hear of The Butlers Club?"

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"May we make haste slowly, Miss Burroughs?" begged Ellery, dragging over a chair. *"Two* butlers? The Butlers *Club?* Where? When? In short, what?"

The goddess graciously explained. Aphrodite-like, The Butlers Club had risen out of the golden foam of the 'twenties. Hoity-toitier than even the Union, Century, or Metropole Clubs, its membership had been restricted to the thirty noblest butlers of them all, who pooled their considerable resources and leased a haughty brownstone in the Sixties, just off Fifth Avenue, for their clubrooms.

By 1939 the depression and natural causes had lopped the membership to a butler's dozen. But the club treasury took on a hideous life of its own, for the survivors—privy to the financial secrets of their multimillionaire employers—invested in common stocks for five dollars and less a share, and by 1963 the club owned the brownstone and three million dollars' worth of blue-chip securities besides.

Today a mere two members, long since retired from butling, survived. Both were in their eighties—William Jarvis (who had, it appeared, a repulsive grandson named Benzell Jarvis), and Peter Burroughs, Edie's grandfather, both of whom lived at the club.

"Ben Jarvis and I lead lives of our own elsewhere and," Miss Burroughs added grimly, "apart, thank goodness. But under the bylaws the members must live at the club or forfeit their rights of survivorship."

"Rights of *survivorship?"* Mr. Q was sniffing like an enchanted hound dog. "Do you mean to say this association of major-domos created a tontine? That wonderful old stupidity in which everything goes to the last beneficiary left alive?"

"Yes, Mr. Queen."

"I'm amazed. Butlers are supposed to be the most conservative group on earth."

"You evidently don't know much about butlers," chimed Miss Burroughs. "They're all born gamblers. Anyway, by now those two old ninnies have only one thought—to outlive the other and so fall heir to the club treasury. It's all pretty silly, and it would be amusing if not for the fact . . ." She hesitated.

"If not for what fact?"

"Well, that's really why I'm here, Mr. Queen. Last evening I dropped by for my weekly visit to Grandfather . . ."

The Night Before, 7 P.M.: Edie found the pair of octogenarians in the oak-and-leather "silence room," engaged in making a great deal of what, in any but butlers, would have been unseemly noise.

"And you, Jarvis," Edie heard her grandfather shout in an undertone, "have a narsty mind!" Peter Burroughs was a long withered root of a man, all crooked with age, and he was vibrating

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as in a high wind.

"Really, Burroughs?" chortled William Jarvis. Jarvis was little and bald and livid, and the chortle sounded remarkably evil. "Can you deny trying to put me out of the way in order to be able to leave the club fortune to your granddaughter?"

"I can, Jarvis, and I do!"

"*Mr.* Jarvis, really," said Edie, shocked. "Nobody's trying to put you out of the way."

"No, indeed, you doddering scullion," said old Burroughs to old Jarvis in a refined shriek. "The boot is quite on the other foot! It is *you* who are planning to kill *me* for the tontine, to pass it over to that playboy grandson of yours!"

And the two old men tottered toward each other's throats, claws at the ready.

At that moment, fortunately, Benzell Jarvis arrived on *his* weekly visit, which always seemed to coincide with Edie's, and stepped between the bristling gaffers. For once Edie was glad to see him (young Jarvis, who was an exemplary Dr. Jekyll in company, became an instant Mr. Hyde when he could catch Edie alone).

"Here, Edie," said Ben Jarvis, who was as little and bald as his grandfather, "you take your old fool, and I'll take my old fool, and we'll put 'em away—I wish there were locks on their bedroom doors—and then . . . you and me . . . ?"

". . . but I'm worried half to death, Mr. Queen," Edie concluded, not mentioning the judo chop she had had to resort to in escaping from young Mr. Jarvis. "Each thinks the other is out to murder him, and they might do each other real harm in imagined self-defense. It seems ridiculous to go to the police, and yet—what shall I do?"

"Don't they employ anyone to take care of them?"

"The houseman and the cook work afternoons only; they sleep out. Nobody's there at night if one of them should get a senile notion."

"Then what is required in this emergency," said Ellery with gravity, "is an unofficial show of authority. My father is a police inspector, Miss Burroughs, and this is just the kind of crime-prevention work he dotes on. Excuse me while I telephone him."

Later: For a man who doted on crime prevention, Inspector Queen seemed extraordinarily unenamored of this particular opportunity. The inspector glared at his son as they waited with Edie Burroughs on the sidewalk in front of The Butlers Club for Ben Jarvis (the inspector had insisted on phoning him to join them); he glowered at Jarvis as that young man, clearly suffering from hangover,

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crawled out of a cab; and as they all mounted the brownstone steps he muttered to Ellery, "What in the so-and-so is the goldang idea?"

But he pressed the bell. And again. And again, and again. "Are they deaf as well as mush-headed?" the inspector growled.

"It's a very loud bell," said Edie Burroughs nervously. "Oh, do you suppose—?"

"Allow me," said Ellery, whipping out his trusty picklock gun. He unlocked the door and they stepped through a time machine into a living past of dark woods, altitudinous ceilings, vast stained-glass chandeliers, brassy firedogs, and many many oil paintings of—incredibly—butlers.

And, oddly, a continuous trilling sound.

"That's Grandfather's alarm clock," Edie exclaimed, "in his bedroom. Why doesn't he turn it off?"

She bounded like Artemis toward the rear of the main floor, explaining on the fly that her grandfather could no longer climb stairs. And as she burst into the old butler's bedroom the girl wailed, and stopped, and turned away; and just as the Queens sprang to the big brass bed to stoop over Peter Burroughs, the old-fashioned single-alarm clock on the nightstand uttered a last peevish screek and went as dead as its owner.

Old Burroughs, fully dressed, was sprawled across the bed. There were several ugly scratches on his barklike cheeks, but no other signs of violence.

"From the condition of the body, he's been dead since last night," said Inspector Queen after a while. "Did he have those face scratches when you two left here?"

"No," said Ben Jarvis, absently embracing Edie. "Tough luck, sugar. My condolences."

"Thank you, Ben," said Edie, "but no hands? Please?"

"I think, Jarvis," said Ellery, eyeing Ben coldly, "we had better look in on your grandfather, too. Where is his bedroom? Upstairs? No, Miss Burroughs, you'd better wait for us down here."

So they found little old William Jarvis crumpled on his bedroom floor, fully clothed also; and *his* cheeks were badly scratched; and he was just as dead as his fellow butler below.

"When," asked young Jarvis wildly, "did *he* die?"

And the inspector rose and said, "Last night, too."

"At 7:46." Ellery nodded, pointing to the bedside electric clock. In falling, the old man's body had jerked the cord out of the wall socket, stopping the clock. "What time did you and Miss Burroughs leave here last night, Jarvis?"

"Not quite 7:30."

They found Edie in the big clubroom downstairs, weeping quietly. She looked up and said, "Dear God, what happened?"

"I'd say they waited until you two left," Inspector Queen said,

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"and then headed for each other again. The only damage they were able to do was scratch each other's faces, but the exertion and excitement must have been too much for both of them. They managed to get back to their bedrooms, collapsed, and died. I'm betting the postmortems show simple heart failure in both cases."

"There, there," Ellery was crooning to the flooded blue eyes. "They were very old, Edie."

"Thus endeth The Butlers Club, and high time, too," said Benzell Jarvis. "All I want to know is, which one died first? Or rather, second?"

"No autopsy can determine the exact moment of death," the inspector said, regarding him as if he were a strange bug, "although I'm positive they died around the same time. You know, Ellery, it makes an interesting problem at that."

"What, Dad?" said Ellery. "Oh! Yes. It does, indeed."

"You're damned right it does," snarled Jarvis. "If old Burroughs died first, my grandfather inherited the tontine and I get the jackpot. If it was the other way around, Edie gets it. There's got to be some way of telling which survived the other, even if it was only for ten seconds!"

"Oh," said Ellery, "there is, Jarvis, there is."

CHALLENGE TO THE READER

In what order did the two ex-butlers die, and how did Ellery know?

As Ellery explained it: "We know what time William Jarvis fell dead last night. The electric clock he stopped in falling says it was 7:46.

"The question, then, is how to determine what time Peter Burroughs died. His alarm clock provides the answer.

"If you want an alarm clock to ring at, say, 8 o'clock in the morning, you must set the alarm *after* 8 o'clock the night before. Because if you set the alarm before 8, it will, obviously, ring at 8 the same night, not at 8 the next morning.

"It was a few minutes past 8 A.M. when Edie Burroughs came to me for help this morning. I had to call you, Dad; you called Ben Jarvis; we all had to meet on 60th Street—it was therefore long past 8 A.M. when we entered The Butlers Club. And what did we hear when we entered? The ringing of Peter Burroughs' alarm clock, which ran down just as we got into his bedroom.

"Therefore Peter Burroughs must have set his alarm long past 8 o'clock last night. To have been able to do that, he had to have been alive long past 8 P.M.

"But your grandfather, Jarvis, died at 7:46 P.M. Miss Burroughs, may I shake the hand of the loveliest multimillionaire of my acquaintance?" ●

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And what of those of us who write for the magazine, and all of you who read it each month? I, for one, can't think of a better tribute than to have *EQMM* immortalized first in print and then in film by the world's best-selling novelist. Anyone who has read one of Stephen King's books (and by now is there anyone who hasn't?) knows that he's one of the great storytellers of our time, a writer whose sheer joy in spinning tales is unmatched and whose skill at pulling you into his sinister universe is enormous. Sure, starring in a Stephen King story means that our favorite magazine is both the victim and cause of a certain amount of violence—but what could be more appropriate for a mystery magazine? I'd rather see an issue of *EQMM* pursued, kicked, tripped over, defaced, and spattered with blood than handled with the gentle reverence some might say befits the magazine's age.

And if anyone's going to manhandle this magazine in the service of a good yarn, there isn't a better man for the job than Stephen King. Not just because he's such a good writer, but also because, being so widely read, he has the almost unique ability to make anything he writes about widely known. In the short term, that means some people who might not otherwise know about *EQMM* may pick up a copy and read stories by some of us lesser-known folk, and maybe, along the way, discover some new favorite writers to follow.

As for the long term, well—no one can predict the workings of posterity, of course. Who, when this magazine debuted back in 1941, would have guessed it would still be going strong in 2004? But I'm with the folks who say that a hundred years from now people will still be reading Stephen King's books, just as people today still read and adore the work of Arthur Conan Doyle. If so, my grandkids and their grandkids will know about *EQMM* just as I know about Baker Street and Reichenbach Falls.

All I can say is, Thanks, Steve, for taking us along for the ride.○

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Helps reduce glare-related eyestrain

Soft and pure white light spreads evenly across your personal space. So you see more comfortably for reading, working, and all close up tasks and hobbies. There is virtually no glare, making this the perfect companion light for computer work.

Save $$$ on your electric bills!

The supplied high-tech 27-watt bulb gives as much light as an ordinary 150-watt bulb, but uses far less energy. The bulb can last up to 5000 hours - 5 times longer than other bulbs—for years of normal use.

We've nicknamed our Sunlight Lamp the "it's great to be alive lamp!"

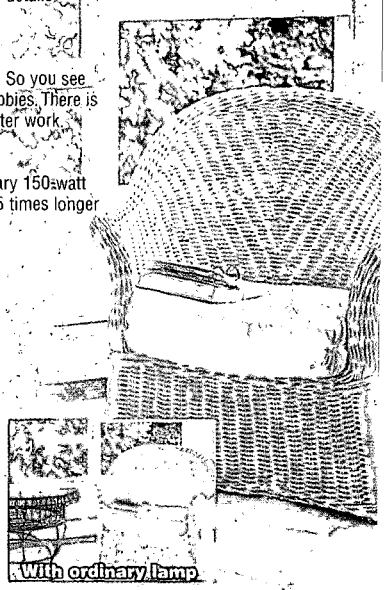
Many people say that dreary, dark days make them feel "blue" and that bright sunny days have a cheerful and energizing effect. Now you can switch on the sunlight indoors every day of the year!

A word about this unheard of price

This lamp features the state-of-the-art performance you expect from the well-respected Bell & Howell name. We have a special arrangement to offer it to you at an unbelievably low price. *Orders will be filled on a first come, first served basis.*

Get your floor lamp home for just $19.99!

If you choose the 4-payment plan, we will ship you the floor lamp with your first payment of $19.99 plus shipping and handling. After that we'll bill you $19.99 once a month for three additional payments. **3 year warranty.**



Call toll-free TODAY to order your Bell & Howell Sunlight Floor Lamp while supplies last!
Floor Lamp (60.5"high): $79.95 plus S&H
For fastest service call toll-free
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24 hours a day, 7 days a week / We accept checks by phone!

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